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**The conditional autonomy  
of the critical press in China**

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*Elin Sæther*



## Chapter one

# Introduction

The main purpose of this dissertation is to explore how the discursive practices of critical journalism in China are conducted within the context of an authoritarian one-party state. Discourses shape understandings of the world. They are politically powerful as means of categorizing and organizing signs. Discursive changes reflect and generate social changes, which is why control over language use is important for maintaining relations of domination. In China, the development of more critical journalism challenges the party-state's discursive control. The Chinese media has been, and still is, conceived by party-state authorities as central to upholding their power, and the media continues to be defined as the mouthpiece (*houshe*) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This mouthpiece role turns journalists into propaganda workers.

To party-state authorities, the mouthpiece role of the media presupposes control and restrictions that are incompatible with freedom of expression. When Chinese journalists define themselves as investigative and critical, they exceed the limitations of the mouthpiece role and redefine the media's role in society, thereby confronting the party-state's control of the public sphere. This contention cannot be explained simply

as an opposition between civil society and the state (Keane 2001). Critical journalism has evolved within a state-controlled media system where the boundaries between state and society are blurred. An ambition of autonomy is central to the professional identity of critical journalists, but in a context in which the media is subject to state control, they employ a three-fold strategy of adapting to constraints, utilizing new opportunities and pushing at the boundaries constraining their work.

Critical journalists work within a state-owned media system while seeking to establish new spaces of representation by including previously absent perspectives and voices in the public sphere. When the media presents stories about people who suffer from poverty, the abuse of power or corruption, these narratives reach audiences beyond their local context. Such representations confront political authorities with the population's discontent. Media narratives focusing on people's grievances point to the authorities' responsibility for these circumstances. Such exposure of illegitimate political practices may contribute to strengthening accountability within authoritarian political systems, which may explain why party-state authorities meet critical and investigative journalism with caution, containment and boundaries. Nevertheless, the authorities accept critical journalism as long as it targets limited problems on the local scale, because it provides them with important information. When the party-state acts and addresses these problems, it enhances its legitimacy and contributes to conveying an image of the party-state as responsive. If critical journalism remains within the limits imposed by the party-state, it can be compatible with a modernized version of the mouthpiece role.

The development towards more critical journalism within the Chinese media illustrates some general characteristics of political reform in the



post-Mao period of economic reform which began in the late 1970s, such as the tension between political control and market forces. The transition from a planned economy to a market-driven one has transferred power to social actors other than the ruling Communist Party. Conflicts between political control and the power of the market have been at the core of Chinese politics during the last thirty years of economic reform, often manifested as disputes within the political elite over the pace and extent of reforms. The diversification of the media field and the development of more critical journalism can be described as unintended consequences of economic reform, and the party-state's coping strategies are revealing for their attempt to balance key political interests and the development towards a market economy. This tension has resulted in periods of relative liberalization followed by tighter control.

Within liberal media theory, the media's ability to assume a watchdog role is understood as a consequence of its economic independence. This positions private ownership and freedom from state involvement as preconditions for the media's ability to contribute to democracy (Curran 2005). Throughout the period of economic reform the Chinese media has achieved increasing financial independence from the party-state. As a result, the sheer number and variety of media products have increased enormously. In the same period, the internet has revolutionized information access, and has contributed to the fierce competition within the Chinese media market. Combined with a decentralized control structure, this has made more problem-oriented, critical journalism possible within Chinese media. When in the 1980s the party-state reduced subsidies and allowed the media to retain its own profits, this raised observers' expectations of a potential transition. Political liber-

alization was believed to follow in the wake of economic liberalization. As the actual development of Chinese media has proceeded, it has become obvious that economic liberalization has not erased the political conception of the mouthpiece role of the media. In China, as elsewhere, critical journalism does not reflect a particular economic development, but is constituted through contextual, political processes.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The dissertation is structured around two research questions. The first addresses how critical journalism adds new dimensions to the political roles of the media, and the second addresses the relationship between party-state authorities and critical journalists. To explore the political implications of critical journalism in China, the first question asks:

*What are the political roles of the Chinese media?*

The understanding of the term *political* that is applied in this dissertation goes beyond practices that are limited to formal, political institutions. Within discourse theory, politics are connected to the way people organize and control meaning. They are means of producing identities and antagonisms. Through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion they make some social acts and strategies more likely than others (Howarth, Norval and Stavrakakis 2000, Laclau and Mouffe 2001). In a discursive understanding, the political denotes conflicts of interests, and the strategies of power, domination and resistance that are inherent aspects of every social system. *Politics*, on the other hand, are strategies designed to reduce or deny conflict (Mouffe 2005). Hence, the political role of the Chinese media is not limited to what it is assigned by the party-state authorities,

but is also a product of the media's own ability to convey conflicts and diverging perspectives in society.

The development of more critical perspectives in the media has not been a uniform tendency, and critical journalism exists in the form of pockets within a larger structure. The Chinese print media has been at the forefront of the development of more problem-oriented, critical and investigative journalism, and this dissertation focuses in particular on the role played by a newspaper affiliated with Guangdong Province authorities, *Southern Weekend (Nanfang Zhoumo)*. For a number of years it has been very influential, and its journalists and editors have been crucial in developing and conveying an idea about what it means to be a critical and investigative journalist (de Burgh 2003a). Geographical variations in levels of control have created different opportunities in various locales, but the influence of critical journalism is not limited to these places or only to the print media. The discursive and social strategies of print journalists influence the understanding of the media's role in general, and in cases when critical journalists from the press take up work in television, they bring their previous experience with them.

Critical journalism challenges the restrictions placed upon media content and practices within the Chinese media field, and the power relations between the restrictive party-state and critical journalists form the background of the second research question:

*How is the media's conditional autonomy being restricted, and how do critical journalists attempt to increase their autonomy?*

The *conditional autonomy* of the media is a concept that is designed to capture the combination of increased freedom and the continuation of con-

trol and restrictions that characterize the Chinese media field. The introduction of market mechanisms into the media sector has led to competition and diversification, which have provided Chinese audiences with more access to information than ever before. When the media's autonomy is conditional, it is because party-state authorities have retained their power to regulate and sanction the media. Journalists are vulnerable to interference not only from party-state authorities, but also from private actors. There is no media law to protect the work of journalists, and this absence enables party-state authorities to regulate the media according to their varying political interests.

In this dissertation, *critical journalists* is a label used to refer to journalists and editors who conduct investigative and problem-oriented journalism; this identity is constructed in opposition to the media's mouthpiece role and its propaganda discourse. By focusing on social problems rather than the authorities' achievements, and by crossing the limits of propaganda discourse, critical journalists differentiate themselves from the majority of media workers in China.

By asking what critical journalists do to increase their autonomy, I address how the social and discursive strategies of journalists are conducted within a particular context. Critical journalists' social strategies involve choices about issues, locations and investigative methods. Their strategies are designed to avoid crossing boundaries while retaining their ability to communicate about social problems and critical issues in the media. Discursive strategies are important in achieving this end because conscious and careful choices of narrative techniques, framing and vocabulary make it possible to discuss issues that would otherwise be judged to be too critical and not suitable for publication.

Investigative journalism and the idea that journalists should serve the people have become an ideal for the professional identity of Chinese journalists (de Burgh 2003b). The everyday practices of most Chinese journalists, however, do not correspond to this ideal. The work of most news journalists explains the necessities of current political policies, emphasises the importance of respecting authorities and conveys information about the activities of the CCP leadership (de Burgh 2003b). This general compliance reflects the party-state's willingness to, and capacity for, controlling Chinese media (Esarey 2006, He 2004). One perspective on the Chinese media field is that relative financial freedom has not led to any increase in substantial media freedom. This notion is supported by the many cases where the party-state has interfered, sanctioned and even imprisoned journalists and activists who challenge the party-state's limits on freedom of expression (He 2004). Reports by non-governmental organizations such as *Reporters without Borders*<sup>1</sup> and *Committee to Protect Journalists*<sup>2</sup> state that interferences against journalists in China are grave and common. The continued repression of freedom of expression in China illustrates the existing relations of domination, but the persistence of transgressions and journalists' willingness to challenge these relations of domination demonstrate resistance. This resistance indicates that there have been changes in the power relations within the Chinese media field. Those who dispute and challenge the boundaries of the Chinese media belong to a minority of journalists, who utilize particular circumstances to promote a different understanding of the journalist's role in society.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rsf.org>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cpj.org>.

The impact of their practices, however, has consequences for the perception of media's role in general.

## **ORGANIZATION OF THE DISSERTATION**

Chapter two, *Media, power and spaces of representation*, is divided in two parts. Part one addresses theoretical perspectives on the conditional autonomy of the media. Media scholars are among the main contributors to this debate, and a central question under discussion is whether or not state-independent ownership is a precondition for the media's ability to serve as a democratizing force in society. This argument is criticized by critical media scholars who argue that in many cases state-owned media have served the public interest precisely because they are not subjected to the same economic interests as privately owned media. The ownership and organization of media institutions are not sufficient to determine what role the media plays in state-society relations. To answer this, it is necessary to take the media's social and discursive practices into account. In particular, the media has a central role to play in shaping public discourse, and this is a crucial aspect of the political agency of critical journalists in an authoritarian context.

Chapter two – part two is entitled *Containing resistance: hegemony and domination*. The perspectives under discussion here all relate to the concept of power. Power is a nodal point for social science, it is contested and is inscribed with different meaning depending on its theoretical context. In the scholarly debate in the 1950s, power denoted the ability of a social actor to decide the outcome of a conflict. Subsequent Foucauldian perspectives have suggested that power is about the structuring of meaning, and have described it as a capillary and productive force. To analyse

the conditional autonomy of media, it is necessary to turn to more discursive understandings of power, while keeping in mind that political oppression is conducted through relations of domination that are direct and physical as well as discursive. In such relations, the oppressed voice their concerns and their resistance in a hidden transcript. Confronting that transcript is a public transcript offering representations of existing relations of domination as natural, legitimate and in the public's best interests. Inserting elements of the hidden transcript into the public transcript is a strategy of resistance which can create new spaces of representation. In a context of domination, this is one way the media can contribute to processes of democratization, by making new perspectives, which openly challenge hegemonic representations of space and politics, become part of the public sphere.

The discussion of the relationship between discourse and the physical reality of materiality continues in chapter three, on *Meaning, materiality and the research process*. The chapter begins with an examination of the disagreement between critical realism and discourse theory concerning the power of language. The outcome of this evaluation is that while these approaches place emphasis on either side of the materiality/discourse opposition, they are more compatible than mutually exclusive. The compatibility of discourse theory and critical realism stems from a shared emphasis on structure rather than agency, and a less developed understanding of social practice. To do fieldwork is to engage with meaning and materiality, structures and agency, and in the latter part of this chapter I present my reflections on my approach to the field of critical journalism in China. Fieldwork is a learning process in which the researcher's ability meaningfully to interpret her findings increases in tandem with

her knowledge of the social context. My daily life in China both as a language student and during fieldwork and the cooperation and discussions with student assistants were important means of acquiring contextual knowledge for this project. This forms the background for my interpretations of the data material, which consists mainly of interviews with critical journalists and of newspaper articles that demonstrate critical Chinese media discourse.

Chapter four, *State-society relations in China*, presents the political and institutional context of Chinese media. A main characteristic of this context is that the boundaries between state and society are blurred. Under Mao, the party-state was constructed in order to incorporate every aspect of society. Party and government institutions were established from the local level to the central and there was no clearly defined private space. This has made civil society a problematic concept in the Chinese context. The design of the Chinese propaganda system reflects the absence of a clear division between state and society. It is based on the conception of the party as the vanguard of the people, and of propaganda as means of educating and enlightening the people. In addition to the media, propaganda involved literature, art, music, scientific research, public health, sports and museums, because all these fields were regarded as important in engineering a new socialist culture. The positioning of the media as part of the propaganda system means that the media's primary place in the state-society continuum is as an integrated part of the party-state.

How the role of media has changed during the period of economic reform is the main topic under discussion in chapter five, *Diversifying media practices: the changing political roles of Chinese journalists*. The media's position within the propaganda system means that it has an instrumental role



that is captured in its metaphorical assignment as the mouthpiece of the party. Journalists have been defined as propaganda workers, but they have also been required to mediate information about social conditions and people's responses to party policies. This information, however, has been communicated through an internal media channel. Economic reforms and marketization have added new aspects to media's role, and have also opened for more critical journalism in some parts of the Chinese media. The role played by the newspaper *Southern Weekend* is of particular interest in this regard because it has defined what it means to be an investigative newspaper seeking to mediate information in a bottom-up manner. Critical journalism challenges the mouthpiece conception of media, but it also maintains the ambiguity between information and propaganda that has characterized the political role of Chinese media. This chapter argues that one of the important contributions of critical journalism lies in the normalization of critical discourse. This means that to an increasing extent social problems can be discussed in the open media, rather than being restricted to an internal channel.

Chapter six, *The polyphony of Chinese critical press discourse*, continues the discussion about the political role of media through a discourse analysis of newspaper articles from *Southern Weekend*. This analysis also sheds light on what critical journalists do to increase their autonomy. Because freedom of expression is limited in China, critical discourse must be presented in ways that make it acceptable within the boundaries established by the party-state. These requirements are reflected in careful ways of approaching and framing social problems, and in the polyphonic expressions that include the dominating discourse in representations of social problems. A general feature is that criticism must be limited and

local, and explicit systemic perspectives on social problems must be avoided. Individualized narratives about human misery and suffering form an alternative to overriding social criticism, as do limited but serious problems on the local scale that only provide vague hints regarding the political responsibility for such misery.

Chapter seven, *Conditional autonomy: restrictions and resistance*, focuses on journalists' strategies for dealing with the limits and boundaries of critical journalism. In this chapter the emphasis is on the social, rather than the discursive, strategies of critical journalists in China. Self-regulation is the principal response to the limits and potential sanctions of critical journalism. Critical journalists take into consideration what they think can be accepted and what must be avoided, basing their decisions on experience and their interpretation of political signals. Mechanisms of self-regulation are also built into media organizations, through hierarchical structures that make editors responsible for the work of their subordinate journalists. Both local and central authorities are responsible for imposing limitations on critical journalism. Local authorities control and sanction the media entities under their jurisdiction, and can restrict access to sources when the outside media seeks to report on local issues. Nevertheless, critical journalism in China has developed because journalists have found ways to work within and around the limits and boundaries imposed by the party-state. They apply investigative methods, are skilful in utilizing their own networks and seek to approach issues and problems in the ways that are least likely to invoke negative sanctions. The result has been the emergence of new spaces of representation within the Chinese media that allow voices other than those of the authorities to be heard in the public sphere.

Chapter eight, *Conclusion*, returns to the research questions and presents a condensed outline of the main arguments of the dissertation. This chapter expresses how the dissertation contributes to an understanding of political reform and the media's role in China, and discusses how the conditional autonomy of the critical press in China sheds light on more recent developments within the Chinese media field.

Chapter two – part 1

## **Media, power and spaces of representation**

During the twists and turns of the development of the social sciences during the last decades, language and the politics of meaning have become focal points for discussion. This dissertation attempts to shed light on how the social and discursive practices of critical journalism in China are conducted within an authoritarian political context. In the following analysis of the political role of Chinese critical press, the main finding is that the relationship between the state and the critical media is one of *conditional autonomy*: the media has taken on a freer and more critical role compared to its former propaganda function, but the Chinese party-state remains a dominating force in relation to the media. The development of the media is part of a process of political reform that is motivated by the necessity of adjusting politics to the realities of a market economy, international integration and information technology. This context has provided opportunities for more critical and problem-oriented journalism, in spite of regulations and strict control mechanisms aimed at restraining public critical discourse. The situation appears paradoxical: there is increased freedom for the media, but continuing repression; a critical press, but no independent media. Critical journalists lack the capacities for po-

litical agency assumed to be decisive for political participation in established democracies. This raises the question of *what kind of power it is that characterizes and enables critical journalism within an authoritarian state?* The aim of this chapter is to outline a perspective on power and the media that results in an understanding of how political processes evolve in contexts characterized by domination.

This chapter is divided in two parts, of which the first discusses the conditional autonomy of the media. Within the academic literature on the media, media freedom is usually evaluated in relation to ownership structures and independence vis-à-vis political authorities. Here it will be argued that the media's influence on society cannot be reduced to a question of ownership, because its political role also depends upon discursive practices. To the extent that representations put forward by the media challenge the worldview favoured by political authorities, the media is a source of resistance. The relationship between an authoritarian state and a discursively bold media can be described as one of conditional autonomy. Understanding the media's political role through its discursive practices and connections to the state necessitates a contextual approach which takes the particularities of the political system and discursive and social practices into account.

The second part of the chapter continues this contextual approach to social and political institutions, discussing the concepts of power, hegemony and domination. The question of what power is and whether or not it is connected to resources is central within political geography, and the way in which power is conceptualized is decisive for which processes are considered to be politically important. In this dissertation, the emphasis on discursive practices presupposes a notion of power that includes

the construction of meaning. Discourse and the politics of meaning are also central to the discussion of hegemony. Gramsci's theory on hegemony underscores how state and society are relationally constituted (Simon 1991). The Gramscian concept of hegemony as a means of upholding a relation of domination is incorporated in discourse theory's concept of discursive hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Hegemonic strategies involve discursive and material practices, and the latter part of the chapter discusses more material aspects of domination and resistance. Relations of domination are spatial, and hegemonic representations of space contribute to domination. However, resistance is also conducted through spatial strategies, through which social actors communicate points of view which challenge the hegemonic perspective. This source of resistance is captured in Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the *spaces of representation*. The spatiality of power emphasises the necessity of studying media practices as contextual, as they acquire meaning according to specific political practices and discursive environments.

### **THE CONDITIONAL AUTONOMY OF THE MEDIA**

The speed, extent and level of detail of the information currently available to many people in most societies are thought to separate our time from the past. In his trilogy about the rise of the network society, Castells (1996) describes the present as the information age, characterized by more extensive communication and mediation than ever before. The mass media influences the social, political and economic spheres of society, since mediation is central to the functioning of the information age. Mediation is about inscribing the social with meaning and has a governing capacity, in the sense that mediated representations shape conduct

through presenting its recipients with a certain world order. Media texts construe hierarchies of social life, zones of relative safety and danger, and as such exercise power (Chouliaraki 2006). The media's crucial role in shaping people's outlook on their own societies, and the rest of the world, makes it a powerful tool for political authorities and other social forces. In the following pages the discussion centres on why the media has become an important angle from which to analyse state-society relations. The argument is made that in order to capture the importance of the media's role in relation to the state, it is necessary to distinguish between *power over* the media and the *power of* the media. This distinction helps explain how controlled and restricted media practices can contribute to a more democratic space, if media discourses challenge and criticize relevant authorities' representations of the world.

### **THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN THE STATE-SOCIETY RELATION**

In modern societies, the state needs to communicate with its citizens, and the power of mediation means that the mass media is of great importance to the state. The principal objective of the pre-modern state was to increase the wealth and power of the sovereign. The idea of the importance of governing the population first became widespread during the sixteenth century, when feudalism dissolved and territorial, administrative and colonial states appeared. During this period, questions about how to govern others and how people should govern themselves were intensely debated (Foucault 1991). In this discourse of governmentality, the population was construed as central to the running of the state. This new perception of the state's role later developed into an ambition to improve the lot of members of society, as better health and skills would lead to im-

proved longevity and morals, and would in the end result in an improved tax base and more welfare (Scott 1998).

The close relationship between state and society has become an issue at the core of state theory, and theoretical questions have centred on the nature of state-society relations and how these reflect power relations. During the last two decades, approaches to state and society relations have placed the relational constitution of state and society at the forefront (Migdal, Kohli and Shue 1994). Instead of a concept of the state either as a monolithic entity imposing its power upon society, or as a mirror of society, the relationships between social and state actors become the object of analysis. When the media is analyzed in light of the relational constitution of state and society, the decisive question is then how the media work within the state-society nexus.

There are two aspects of media power: power *over* and the power *of* the media (Street 2001). Power over the media is achieved through state regulation, censorship and patterns of ownership. The power to decide what is supposed to be reported is decisive for the role of the mass media in society. The power of the media is a more subtle form of power, one which relates to the ability to mould and change discourses and practices. The media has a privileged position in influencing people's perception of events, people and issues which they have never observed in person. The media's power consists in its ability to influence and change its surroundings. The two aspects of media-related power are clearly interrelated. Ownership interests, advertisers' requirements as well as state regulation and control all influence how and what mass media communicate to their audience (Curran 2005). Nevertheless, the distinction between the two aspects of media power is useful because it contributes to an understand-



ing of how the media may play a political role that goes further than the function the media is assigned by private owners or state regulators.

The media is never independent of the social system within which it operates. It channels information between different parts of society, it shapes and influences discourses and representations and is a mediator between state actors and society. The media serves as a conduit for information transferred between the constituent components of that system; this makes it socially, culturally, politically and economically embedded (Randall 1998). The need for contextual analyses of the media's role is not reflected in most of the media-related literature. Here, the context of liberal democracies dominates, and this literature tends to emphasise the importance of private ownership in securing the media's independence of the state and thereby ensuring the democratic role of the media (Curran and Park 2000, O'Neil 1998). This perspective has less to offer in explaining the media's role in social contexts marked by authoritarian rule, state control and lack of press freedom. In such contexts, the media's ability to contribute to the democratization process cannot solely be deduced from its status as 'free' or 'restricted': this will depend on the actual media's practices as a producer of discourse and mediator of representations.

Rather than defining the media's relation to the state on the basis of the degree of state involvement, it is possible to construct a more contextual approach building on insights from the debate on state-society relations. At the core of this debate has been the question about the state's autonomy vis-à-vis society, which again is a version of a more general discussion of the relationship between economy and politics. Orthodox Marxism sees politics as part of the superstructure mirroring economic

relationships in society, and the state is conceived as a means or tool in the hands of the ruling class. Later Marxist thinkers such as Gramsci (1971) and Poulantzas (1978) have inspired criticism against the economic reductionism inherent in classical Marxism, and their work has been central in developing the concept of the relative autonomy of the state. If the state has a relative autonomy, it means that it is capable of implementing decisions even though they may be contrary to the immediate interests of the dominating class. The relative autonomy of the state introduces the political as a more independent sphere, one that transcends the orthodox Marxist concept of the political as an epiphenomenon of the economy.

The theoretical recognition of the relative autonomy of the state assumes that it has a political capacity. Evans (1995) criticizes this tendency to equate autonomy and capacity. As part of a more empirical approach to state-society relations, he argues that a state can be nearly completely autonomous, but still weak. The state's capacity to implement decisions depends on its relationship with society, and if these linkages are absent, or weak, the state is autonomous, but lacking political capacity. In the opposite situation, when there are strong linkages between state and society, the state has a strong political capacity. This situation can be described as the *embedded autonomy* of the state. The same analytical distinction between the state's autonomy and its capacity is present in Gramsci's work, but here it is expressed as relating to the strength of the civil society. When the state relates to a weak civil society, this situation forces the state to rely on its coercive means to implement its policies; in contrast, hegemony based in a strong civil society reduces the need for coercion (Simon 1991).

More recent work on the relations between state and society advocates a non-monolithic view of the state (Migdal et al. 1994). Neither 'state' nor 'society' are clearly demarcated entities, and to analyse their relations it is necessary to identify the various parts, organizations and practices which constitute them. Some parts of the state may have high autonomy and high capacity, while other state organizations may lack similar resources. Analyses of the media's role in society usually point to its independence from the state as a decisive factor. However, if Evans' (1995) argument is applied, and independence means the same as autonomy, the picture becomes more complex. In Evans-inspired thinking, media organizations that are highly autonomous, but low on capacity, will be able to do what they want, but have little influence on state policies. On the other hand, mass media that has an embedded autonomy with strong linkages to the state might have a high capacity resulting in a strong influence on the political development of the society. This opens the way for evaluations of media's political role that do not rest solely on the basis of media's independence, but takes the contextuality of state-society relations into account.

In authoritarian states, where state power cannot be influenced through democratic elections, media independence is often highly restricted. When a certain level of autonomy is allowed, the media can be one of very few channels of influence from society to the state. I suggest that this situation can be understood as *conditional autonomy*. This conception is grounded in an understanding of the social as open and of hegemonic orders as changeable, while also recognizing the relative strength of the state versus social actors. It is a conceptualization of the state-society relationship that allows for an analytical separation of autonomy

and capacity, important for explaining situations where political influence on the state depends on close ties rather than on autonomy. Finally, conditional autonomy is a concept that opens the way for an analysis of democratizing political practices and their implications, in contexts where the state remains in position to impose sanctions upon any unwanted political developments.

### **THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY**

A free and independent media is conceived as being a precondition for a vital democracy. The media provides information that is regarded as crucial for citizens' ability to make informed choices in elections (O'Neil 1998). An important question then becomes what the media's role is in authoritarian societies and one-party states, such as China. Is the media in non-democracies only a propaganda machine, or is it possible that state-controlled media can also contribute to democratizing political practices? The discussion which follows suggests that the simple opposition between independent and restricted media is insufficient as a basis for understanding the media's role in different societies. This distinction rests on a belief in the unrestricted position of the mass media in liberal-democratic countries. The argument put forward in this text is that an understanding of the political role of the media depends on a contextual approach that encompasses both discursive and institutional perspectives on media practices.

Within traditional liberal theory, the importance of the media is connected to its role as a free-market watchdog. The media's major task is to function as a check on the state by monitoring state institutions and exposing abuses of state power. The fulfilment of the watchdog role de-

depends on private ownership and freedom from state involvement. Any state engagement within the media sector is perceived as a threat against the media's freedom that will prevent it from exercising its role as a watchdog (Curran 2005). The liberal theory of the free-market watchdog represents a state-centred approach to the relationship between state and society. The state's monopoly on legitimate violence sets it apart from other social actors, and the state is construed as the seat of power from which the public needs to be protected. Investigative journalism is supposed to safeguard public interests and uphold democracy by uncovering obscured truths, exposing immoral or illegal practices and defending of victims of injustice (Curran 2005, de Burgh 2000a). Equally important for democracy is the media's role in providing an arena for information and debate. Through journalistic practice that reflects conflicts and gives voice to a plurality of interests, journalists mediate the interests of the people in a way that responsive governments take into account. As such, the mass media serves as a channel for continuous feedback from citizens to their elected representatives (Curran 2005).

A principal problem with the above conception of the relationship between the state and the mass media is that it places insufficient emphasis on sources of power other than state power (Curran 2005). A substantial portion of global media is owned by large corporations, such as media conglomerates, and even in liberal democracies it is naïve to conceive of the media as being fully independent. The power of corporate interests demonstrates that private ownership of the media is not a sufficient guarantee for the freedom of the media. If the public/private distinction is made synonymous with the restricted/free opposition, the countervailing interests involved in the media's relationship to corporate as well as

government power remain hidden. For instance, privately owned media have supported authoritarian state rule in Argentina and Chile (Curran 2005), and private media in Taiwan accepted and contributed to legitimizing authoritarian rule (Lee 2000). Media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who controls the Star TV network in China, removed the BBC's World Service channel in response to Chinese authorities' negative reactions to the channel's reports from the crackdown on the democracy movement in 1989 (Chambers 2000). In the late 1990s, there was a strong belief that the globalization of media and the development of the internet would bring down totalitarian regimes and pave the way for democracy (Monbiot 2005). This optimism did not take into account that internet technology has developed on a commercial basis that has also made it susceptible to state interests that weigh in the opposite direction of free information. In other words, private ownership is not a guarantee for a critical attitude in relation to state power; in order truly to be a watchdog, the media needs to extend its control and criticism to corporate power as well as state power.

The image of completely free, unconstrained media power in liberal democracies is an idealized picture of a more complex situation. In liberal democratic countries, the relationship between government and the media is often characterized by mutual dependency. The media needs access to power holders, and politicians depend on media coverage. Watchdog journalism is facilitated by the political opposition, as they have an interest in exposing problems and misconduct that can be blamed on their political antagonists (de Burgh 2000a). The implication is that even investigative journalism does not take place the place of independent of power holders and state authorities.

Private, free market media is also subject to economic constraints that influence how the media contributes to democracy. Deregulation and commercialization of media appears to have reduced rather than increased the amount of watchdog journalism (de Burgh 2000b). Investigative journalism is expensive and resource-intensive and requires editors and owners who are willing to place social responsibility above profitability. This has meant that public media has been an important provider of watchdog journalism (de Burgh 2000b), contrary to what should be expected according to the free-market thesis. Market constraints also influence the media's role in providing an arena for information and debate, since there are high costs involved in establishing a new outlet of the modern news media (Curran 2005). The commercialized press tends to prioritize content that maximizes sales, even if this can be said to undermine the freedom of information. In general, human interest and entertainment stories tend to be most marketable, while public affairs account for only a small part of media coverage. Finally, the importance of income derived from advertising in commercial media gives advertisers a profound influence on the media's development. Media that attract a wealthy audience also attract more advertisers. It can be argued that this contributes to an information gap, where the media for the general public is information-poor, and the media consumed by the wealthy contains more substantial, investigative journalism. Curran's main argument is that the market undermines the kind of information that is complex and nuanced, and that it encourages simplified, decontextualized stories filled with stereotypes (Curran 2005).

The constraints on a free media role represent a critique of liberal theory's positioning of a free-market media as a precondition for the media's

democratic role. On the other hand, Lee (2000) warns against underestimating the value of a media that is independent of the state. In the case of Taiwan, the media has been partly private, but the largest private actors have been prone to cooptation by and close cooperation with the state. The entanglements of state and market interests led to a strengthening of state power. Small-scale private media, on the other hand, was subject to less state control. It offered an outlet for criticism and debate that was not allowed in state organs, and that the dominant private actors avoided. When foreign cable TV became popular and increased the challenge to the state's domination of the media, the private, state-loyal media also became more likely to deviate from official positions in order to survive in the competitive media market. The result has been a diversification of media and media content, and a weaker, but still dominating state (Lee 2000).

The various limitations on the media's watchdog role weaken liberal theory's conception of the independent media. However, the media continues to be of great importance in processes of democratization. The media's role in contexts of domination is less clear. In spite of the assumption of the close relationship between media and democracy, there are few attempts to analyse the media's role in political transitions (O'Neil 1998). In the debate that followed in the wake of the transitions in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, the media was hardly mentioned. This absence is due to an elite perspective that has dominated approaches to political transitions. Elites play a crucial political role in democratic transitions, but the institutional environment must be taken into consideration as well. Existing political, cultural and economic patterns are likely to influence the course taken during transition;



in other words, the path-dependency of political change indicates the importance of studying, among other institutions, the mass media (O'Neil 1998). How the media contributes to democratic transitions depends upon a range of factors, including ownership status. People's access to media depends on a range of factors including the population's literacy rate, the degree of poverty and their access to electricity. Severe state-control might cause extensive circulation of underground publications, but state-run media may also be more inclined to ignore censorship patterns in periods of rapid change (O'Neil 1998).

The elite perspective on political transitions reflects a narrow conceptualization of democracy and democratization, one that emphasises the formal characteristics of democracy rather than its substantial aspects. The distinction between formal and substantial democracy was introduced by de Tocqueville, and implies that there is no necessary correspondence between the formal institutions of a democracy and the redistribution of power that makes citizens able to influence the decision making processes (Luckham, Goetz and Kaldor 2003). Grugel (2002) elaborates on the characteristics of formal and substantive democracy and describes a formal democracy as a minimalist conceptualization centring on the regular holding of fair elections. The competition must be between at least two political parties, and there must be an inclusive suffrage. Substantial democracy is a more inclusive concept and depends on whether or not rights have real meaning for people. Democratization is understood as the processes that contribute to this goal, by introducing and extending citizenship rights, as well as creating a democratic state. Such politics of inclusion contain processes that give citizens a political voice and a stake in government. The government's accountability and respon-

siveness to the needs and interests of its citizens is crucial, as is the construction of democratic institutions that enable political contestation and debate. A successful politics of inclusion will lead to a situation where democratization from below is combined with effective governance (Luckham et al. 2003).

In many societies, this goal will seem unattainable, but the concept of politics of inclusion is still valuable because it points out *processes of democratization* that may occur, even within authoritarian states, without necessarily resulting in the constitution of a formal democracy (Luckham et al. 2003). Sklar's (1987) analysis of developmental democracy introduces the phrase "democracy in parts", meaning that even within authoritarian states, there might be pockets of democracy embedded in institutions such as the courts, the media or the unions. Authoritarianism is not necessarily monolithic, and to the extent that institutions are able to create expanded spaces for dissent and debate, they contribute to democratizing in its substantial sense, while not necessarily resulting in the establishment of a formal democracy.

The public recognition of the existence of conflicts and problems within a society is of great importance for a democracy (Mouffe 2005). This means that the democratizing potential of media practices depends in particular on the media's ability to discuss social and political problems, mediate grievances, as well as critique power holders. Mouffe (2005) understands *the political* as a sphere where there will always be power relations, conflict and irreconcilable interests. At the core of political processes is the formation of a 'we' in opposition to a 'they', and the antagonism between different collective identities cannot be resolved. In other words, democracy is not about removing such conflicts, but relates

to the possibility of articulating conflicts and critique in the open. In Mouffe's thinking, *politics*, on the other hand, refer to the manifold practices of politics, which often take as their goal the reduction of the impact of conflicts, rather than recognizing them as legitimate expressions (Mouffe 2005). This is what happens in liberal democracies characterized by political deregulation and emphasis on the capacities of the market.

Liberalist ideology tends to represent society as complex, but harmonious. Liberal discourse propounds the argument that through a rational consensus, every perspective, every interest, every identity can coexist in a non-conflictual way. The assumption that conflicts of interest can be resolved through market mechanisms reduces the scope of the political field. Liberal democracies also tend to replace the historical oppositions between left and right by centre-left and centre-right, and the result is more blurred positions and less political antagonism. The consequence is that conflicts, social problems and criticism are represented as technical issues that should be left to experts to resolve, rather than problems that must be approached as political issues. This negation of the conflictual nature of the political can also be found in the liberal paradigm that advocates a communicative rather than instrumental rationality. When politics is conceived as a moral field in which it is possible to reach a rational consensus through debate and free discussion, it contributes to a depoliticization of social problems (Mouffe 2005). In a state like China, where there is one party that presents itself as the representative of a united people, antagonisms tend to be glossed over and suppressed. Such negation of antagonism and conflict prevents and limits democracy.

The aim of this discussion is to arrive at an understanding of how, in a situation characterized by state control and restrictions, the media can

continue to find outlets that contribute to democratization. Mouffe's argument that the political must be understood as antagonism is a starting point. Politics is about the constitution of we/they oppositions, and to her, "politics is not the overcoming of the we/they opposition but the different ways in which it is established" (Mouffe 2005:14). Democratic politics is about constructing political identities, we/they relations that do not turn into friend/enemy relations. Instead, antagonism should be constructed in a way that makes conflict compatible with society's interests and a legitimate expression for opposition. This requires the recognition that there exists a common bond between the parties in a conflict, which changes the we/they relation from one between enemies to one between adversaries. Mouffe names this kind of relation 'agonism' and argues that democracy's task is to turn antagonism into agonism. In contexts where the media has an ability to influence how social issues should be represented, for instance whether or not issues should be represented as technical problems to be solved or as legitimate conflicts between adversaries, it endows the media with a central role as a potential democratizing force. To the extent that the media contributes to politicizing social issues, it becomes a factor in the democratization process, giving voice to interests that might otherwise remain unrecognized. Mouffe states that the specificity of modern democracy "lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian body" (Mouffe 2005:30). This presupposes a break with the conception of society as an organic body in which conflict is interpreted as a threat to its very existence. A democratic society must provide institutions that allow for the expression of conflicts.

## **THE POWER OF MEDIATION**

It is in matters concerning society's openness to discussion and debate that the media can play an important role in processes of democratization. Democratic spaces in society can be expanded through representations that challenge the authorities' versions of what society is like, such as news items showing grievances among the population, or criticism that calls for accountability and transparency. The media's ability and willingness to mediate such representations does not necessarily mirror its institutional role. In order to understand how politically restrained media can contribute to democracy, it is necessary to analyse the media's discursive practices, and in particular critical media discourse that centres on social problems such as grievances and suffering.

Thompson (1995) attempts to explain the connection between narratives of suffering and democracy. Thompson argues that we need a new understanding of publicness. Traditionally, public life is seen as depending on co-presence and face-to-face interaction. This is an unsatisfactory understanding of public life today, and the mass media is something else than an extension of traditional public life by other means. The mass media's ability to gain recognition for people's concerns is central to democracy, because it compensates for state authorities' tendency to lose touch with the concerns of ordinary individuals. In short, the media can compensate for the lack of responsiveness within the state, but Thompson holds that the media also contributes to a democratization of responsibility. When people are being exposed to narratives about the suffering of other people, in other places, it contributes to democracy. Through such representations people are being exhorted to be responsible citizens with a concern for non-local others. The media politicizes the everyday by

making it visible, and extending the space of the visible is likely to bring forward more collective action in response to mediated information (Thompson 1995).

The main problem in this analysis is the lack of explanation as to *how* media narratives contribute to a democratization of responsibility. This question, on the other hand, is at the core of Chouliaraki's discussion of the power of mediation (Chouliaraki 2006). In her analysis of the spectatorship of suffering, she analyses how news about people in dire conditions is translated into meaning, and how the expected reaction of the spectator is written into media texts. Within media and cultural studies, a topic such as distant suffering has been discussed, but often in a way that focuses on news as image rather than text. The difference is that while the discussion of news as image concentrates on media's ability to convey real suffering and the possible disruptions in the process of mediation, a perspective of news as texts opens the way for a semiotic approach. This view does not exclude visual images, but asks how they contribute to the construction of meaning. Mediation is a technology of discourse that influences conduct, ethics and identities, and this makes it a technology of governmentality. The following discussion addresses the issue of how mediation as a technology of discourse can contribute to processes of democratization (Chouliaraki 2006).

The different constraints on media freedom make it difficult to state exactly how the media constitutes various forms of political discourse and democratic practices on a general basis. Different media genres and their mediation of political discourse, media production, reception and audiences' practices in perceiving and interpreting are all decisive moments influencing the power of mediation. Rather than approaching the

power of mediation from a general point of view, Chouliaraki argues for an approach that focuses on singular texts and their discursive characteristics (Chouliaraki 2006). Discourse analysis highlights a perspective on language and representation as constitutive, and not only constituted. Through articulations, signs are combined in a way that enables some particular representations while excluding others (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Hence, the approach to media texts that Chouliaraki advocates becomes meaningful if singular texts are conceived of as texts generating discourse, as well as generated by discourse.

From the perspective of discourse analysis, mediated political discourse is an attempt to establish particular versions of the issues debated, by combining signs in a way that appears natural and self-evident (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). The media wields great power in deciding what is going to be presented as news, feature stories or entertainment; and the *framing* of news and feature stories influences the audience's perceptions. To deconstruct the frame is a device for analysing how media stories are told as narratives. Journalists animate events and turn them into stories with plots and actors, and the storyline assigns responsibility and causality in relation to the actors. In the media's representation of politics, political actors can be represented as if they were driven by external events, or as an autonomous force deciding the course of action. Such choices convey a particular representation of causality, which make some follow-up angles more likely than others. Frames are structuring tools and they cause particular representations to appear repeatedly in similar versions. For instance, media narratives about Africa tend to place poverty, violence, death, war and famine at the forefront of the narratives, and ignore

or all other possible representations of life and politics on this continent (Street 2001).

Framing is the process of selecting and highlighting some features of reality, while simultaneously underplaying other aspects. Metaphors, verbal depictions and visual images, as well as catchphrases and representations of causes and effects, are important means through which frames are established. The result is a consistent story which establishes a narrative about problems, their causes, the involved responsibilities, implications and solutions. News stories are not different from other media genres, in the sense that they are presented in certain ways that exclude other possible ways of narrating the same event, and they are read according to a set of social codes (Street 2001).

News discourse produces meaning, not only through communicating events that have taken place, but also through its representations of identities, places and possibilities for change. There is always a construction of the imagined audience within the communication practices of the media. Politically, this is interesting since journalists and editors often claim it is their task to reflect the interests, views and concerns of the people. Since this is an unattainable goal, the text mediates an imagined audience (Street 2001). This is perhaps most obvious in media products directed at very specific, targeted audiences, sometimes the imagined reader of a magazine is even given a name and an age to exemplify the intended core audience. However, every media text bears an imprint of an imagined receiver, and the construction of the audience takes place through the text's means of defining that this is a matter of importance to the reader. The imagined audience appears through the construction of a 'we', a collective identity constructed in relation to 'them'. In the US media's repre-



sentations of crime, 'they' have frequently been young, black men who are threatening 'us' (Street 2001). In the Danish election campaign in 2001, the mass media played a central role in defining the relation between the Danish 'we' in opposition to refugees and immigrants as 'them' (Bruun 2005). The media's two-way relationship with the people, mediating information from the state and other authorities, but also reflecting the interests and views of ordinary people, means that 'the people' is discursively constituted in media texts (Street 2001). The media's constitution of the people influences the representations of the relationship between the people and the state and the people and politics. The 'we' of the text is different from the 'they' who make the political decisions (Street 2001). This means that the mass media contributes to constituting the political discourse by deciding what the political discourse is and which questions are included in the category of the political.

The choice of space-time is important in the construction of identities in the text. When distance and difference are emphasised, the implied 'we' in the text is represented as remote from the human objects described. This is a typical characteristic of texts representing distant suffering in Western media, such as flood victims in Bangladesh or internal refugees in Sudan. On the other hand, when suffering is presented in a way that accentuates its relevance for 'all of us', it changes the relationship between the 'us' and 'them' of the text and brings them closer together (Chouliaraki 2006). How a text depicts distance influences how agency is conceptualized, both the agency of the audience as well as the audience of the people involved in the news. Whether or not the news story seems close to the reader influences the creation of feelings such as responsibility.

When analysing modes of reacting to news that convey suffering, Chouliaraki distinguishes between a contemplative mode of spectatorship and forms of viewing that bring about identification with sufferers. Different discursive representations inspire different ways of viewing, but a text can never do more than inspire a certain way of behaving in its audience. A contemplative mode of viewing is a more likely reaction to discourse that emphasise a neutral way of reporting suffering, such as aggregated facts from far-away contexts. Identification, on the other hand, depends upon portraits appearing as 'real people'. This mode of viewing can be likened to a theatre, where the viewer engages in a story about benefactors and persecutors. These are symbolic figures that organize the affective potential of their spectators and raise impulses to protect and comfort the suffering and to denounce and punish evildoers (Chouliaraki 2006). Whether or not a text facilitates such reactions also depends upon the degree to which the victims of suffering are inscribed with agency. People who are represented as having a voice and an ability to act are more likely to evoke pity.

The media's potential for contributing to processes of democratization depends on its ability to evoke agency. If, as Boltanski (1999) writes, agency can be a reader's silent, internal whisper, how can this soundless utterance be of political importance? An affirmative answer to this question presupposes a view of discourse as productive. If a media text has convinced its reader that a person in question has been treated unfairly, or that a group of people has been subject to discrimination, the reader's reaction contributes to a future disposition against similar treatment of people in other situations. It is part of shaping the reader's outlook on society. The ethics of media texts about suffering are connected to how

particular texts present suffering as a moral cause, and whether or not this is something to which the receiver is supposed. In many media texts, the expected reaction to the news is incorporated in the text itself, as various 'helpers' and their reactions are described in the narrative. If a text explains how people have been collecting money, given donations or written petitions on behalf of the victims, these reactions position the objects of suffering as deserving victims and suggest possible ways for receivers to act.

To sum up this discussion, I have argued that a contextual approach is needed in order to capture the democratizing potential of media. The first part of the chapter dealt with questions of media and democracy, and how the media can contribute to processes of democratization within authoritarian contexts. This is less obvious, because authoritarian states prevent the media from serving as an independent watchdog, or as an arena for free, public debate. The chapter argues that the media's *conditional autonomy* in an authoritarian context includes a discursive perspective that enables the media to influence state policies. Even a strongly restricted media may have a conditional autonomy, a space of representation that enables it to contribute to democratizing processes in a context characterized by authoritarian rule, state control and lack of press freedom. The next part of this chapter aims to explore what kind of power the conditional autonomy of media involves, and the relations of domination and resistance the media engages with.

Chapter two – part 2

## **Containing resistance: Hegemony and domination**

In the previous part of the chapter, the topic under discussion was how the media can contribute to democratization. The media's ability to challenge the authorities through criticism and alternative representations makes it a target for control and repression in many parts of the world. In authoritarian states, the authorities' fear of media power frequently subjects journalists and editors to great danger when they cross beyond the limits of officially sanctioned discourse. In more open societies, attempts to control the media are less direct, but the perceived need among authorities to contain media power is not limited to repressive and authoritarian states. The power of words, images and narratives is strong, and the following discussion starts by raising the question of how power can be conceptualized in order to analyse the fear of discursive opposition that characterizes attempts to suppress the media. The chapter then proceeds to discuss how oppositional power and resistance can be contained through political and discursive hegemony, and how such domination can be resisted. The final part of the chapter addresses how relations of power are situated in, and mediated through, space.

## **POWER**

Power is a theoretically contested concept. The way it is defined within various theoretical contributions is often revealing for what it says about their general perspectives on questions within the philosophy of science, such as the structure/agency debate. Power, as it was conceived in mainstream social science from the 1950s and on, referred to A's capacity to make B do something he would otherwise not do (Lukes 2005). This understanding was employed in studies of decision-making, where the actor who was successful in realizing his own initiatives was judged as more powerful than the ones who were defeated (Dahl 1961). In theoretical debates during the 1960s, this conception of power was criticized for its behaviouristic approach, since it did not take into account the influence of social processes appearing prior to the articulation of interests. The argument was that "mobilization of bias" causes some interests to emerge as legitimate, while other interests remain unarticulated and do not become part of the decision-making process (Lukes 2005:20). The behavioural approach to power later became subject to further criticism from Marxist approaches which conceived the problem of interest articulation as a consequence of structural processes. If capitalist societies are seen as depending upon the false consciousness of the suppressed classes, interest articulation does not reveal the real power relations. Hence, Marxists regarded the atomistic perspective inherent in the behaviouristic concept of power as an inadequate basis for understanding how the formation of class consciousness contributes to upholding power relations (Lukes 2005).

Despite such differences, the concepts of power under discussion in this period of time were all closely connected to the question of resources.

Power was conceived as something which actors could possess. This notion of power as something that can be held is also reflected in contemporary everyday language. Allen (2003) has sought to stir up a debate about this relationship between power and resources. He admits that in real life there are good reasons to believe that power and resources are inseparable entities. The US president election campaign demands enormous amounts of capital, and various resource bases such as money, expert knowledge, and social capital all seem to enable people to influence their surroundings. However, Allen argues that resources can be used in foolish ways, they can disappear or lose their value and may not generate the intended result. There is a danger that if power is thought of as something an individual or a company possesses, due to its resources, power acquires a thing-like quality. This reified image of power is problematic, because it does not explain how power comes into being or how it works; it only shows that some have it and others do not. Instead, Allen suggests a concept of power that emphasises power as “a relational effect of social interaction” (Allen 2003:2). An effect is not a thing and cannot be held in advance, but it makes things happen. This way, a distinction is established between the exercise of power and the resources that are mobilized to sustain that exercise.

Allen’s argument prompts a reflection about an aspect of the concept of power that often has been taken for granted. He reminds his readers that different modalities of power, of which seduction and domination are only two, work in different ways and must be analyzed accordingly. However, a literal interpretation of the power/resource argument implies that no sentence should contain words or phrases like ‘power-holder’, ‘with power to’ and so on. This break between power and re-

sources induces a fundamental break with everyday language, and while it opens for a more dynamic understanding of power relations, it does not explain the stability of relations of domination. For the purposes of this chapter, the argument could be made that the immateriality of discursive power is precisely an example of power as an effect rather than power as something which depends upon a particular resource base. That this argument does not sweep aside other concepts of power is due to discursive power being considered to be more powerful when it is institutionalized and extensive – when it appears in relation to resources.

Another possible path to avoid reification of power is outlined in Giddens's (1984) conceptualization of power. Rather than de-linking resources and power, he suggests a more nuanced understanding of resources. Giddens distinguishes between two categories of resources, allocative and authoritative. Allocative resources refer to control over material resources, and have been given priority above the authoritative in both Marxist and non-Marxist explanations of society. Authoritative resources are associated with control over people and their activities. Giddens argues that in order to capture the dynamics of social change, it is necessary to examine the relationship between allocative and authoritative resources. This means that resources and power are related, but Giddens inserts an important distinction between capability and power. People in important positions might control substantial resources, but still be unable to secure the outcome they want. Hence, power is not synonymous with resources, but is a *transformative capacity*. This implies that "all forms of rule have their 'openings' that can be utilized by those in subordinate positions to influence the activities of those who hold power over them" (Giddens 1984:11). Social systems are interwoven with rela-

tionships of autonomy and dependence, and the ability to serve as a catalyst for social change is not reserved to those who control the resources available. In an analysis of media power in an authoritarian context, Giddens' concept of power is useful because it opens for the possibility of the dual existence of domination and resistance. Power makes social systems durable, and upholds domination. However, power does not only denote the ability to bend the will of the weaker (Giddens 1984). Still, for an analysis that requires a theoretical foundation of *how* media power works in the contexts of relations between state and society, an account of how power is related to communication and language is needed. One such may be found in Foucault's work on power, which has inspired the concept of power employed in discourse theory.

The question of how human beings are made into subjects constitutes the core of Foucault's work (Sandmo 1999). There are two main approaches to power in his studies of the processes of subject formations. The first approach concerns the close connection between knowledge and power, and the second is captured in the metaphor of 'capillary power' (Lukes 2005). According to Foucault, the power/knowledge connection is evident in practices directed towards producing knowledge about certain subjects, such as situations where people are subject to observation and categorization. Knowledge about someone also facilitates processes for gaining control over the observed subjects. Foucault writes that in early modernity, power began to be exercised through the provision of social services, and this was followed by the development of knowledge-driven fields such as demography, public health and fertility. The knowledge gained in these areas was a prerequisite for a power that worked on the bodies of individuals, one that influenced their attitudes and everyday



behaviour (Foucault 1980). In his representation of the history of sexuality, Foucault demonstrates how acquired knowledge about sexuality has been a means of achieving control, through discourses that influence the self-government of the human body (Foucault 1990). The intimate connection between knowledge and power occurs because knowledge constitutes a basis for developing disciplinary strategies. The design of categories such as normality and abnormality becomes part of individuals' identity formation and contributes to processes of subject formation. In this process, the effect of external repression is substituted by individuals' own consciences, serving as a more efficient and pervasive way of controlling behaviour.

Foucault aimed to explain how power was exercised, its techniques and tactics, in a concrete and detailed way (Foucault 1980). It was out of these aspects of his work that the concept of capillary power developed. The metaphor of the capillary conjures an image of power as a life-sustaining force that works upon the human body, and it breaks with the notion of power as solely repressive. Foucault argues that if power never achieved anything positive and never contributed to anything other than repression, it would not be obeyed. What makes power accepted is "simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault 1980:119). In other words, Foucault suggests a notion of power as productive; to him, extensive and productive forms of power are a characteristic of modernity. Pre-modern societies were characterized by the power that culminates in the ability of one person to end another's life. This power is negative in the sense that its strength lies in the capability to refuse, deny and hinder the free will of

others. However, it is also a limited mode of power in the sense that its brutality only determines certain domains of people's life. There were spaces of freedom that the power of repression could not penetrate (Sandmo 1999). In contrast to the repressiveness of pre-modern, absolute power, Foucault associates modernity with productive power. This is a capillary power characterized by power over life, and its language is not the brutality of a present authority. It is carried out as the silent work of institutions, discourses and relations which make people who they are. This notion of power is fruitful as a tool for understanding why media power and discursive opposition represents a threat in authoritarian contexts. The media's ability to influence identities and ways of living is one mode of the productive power that makes people become who they are.

Productive power does not float freely, but is embedded in institutionalized practices. In "Discipline and punish" Foucault uses an analysis of the role of penal institutions to illustrate the transition from a limited, absolute form of power to productive power. His intention was to show modernity's "technological take-off in the productivity of power" (Foucault 1980:119). As a symbol of this, Foucault used the Panopticon, which is a never-realized design of a circular prison where inmates would be disciplined through the constant possibility of being observed. Supervision would replace the raw brutality of previous penal institutions, and to Foucault this transition symbolized a new economy of power. He argued that the disciplinary effect of supervision was not limited to prisons, but constituted a fundamental aspect of the work of subject formation carried out in schools, asylums and factories.

Critics of Foucault's analyses of the characteristics of modern, capillary power have objected to the alleged lack of direct repression, and

pointed to the continuation of violent, brutal repression within modernity. For instance Alford (2000) argues that while the Panopticon was intended as a prison design, it should not be confused with the practices of penology. Studies of maximum security prisons indicate rather the opposite of Foucault's observation: that disciplinary power in penal institutions is based on a complete control that makes the 'gaze' of the Panopticon redundant. As long as a maximum security prison controls its entrance and exit, the guards need not observe the inmates. In daily 'counts', the guards ensure that nobody has escaped, and apart from that, inmates can be left to themselves. The extensive process of subject formation described in "Discipline and punish" is absent from such penal institutions (which in fact have rather a lot in common with pre-modern dungeons). Alford's main point is not only that Foucault was wrong about the characteristics of modern prisons, but that he underestimated the importance of traditional, pre-modern power in modern societies. Scott (1990) adds to this critique in his work on domination and resistance. In his studies of contexts in which domination is prominent, such as internal relations in highly stratified peasant societies, the techniques of domination are more direct and less capillary than those described by Foucault. This may partly be due to the differences between domination based on proximity and domination based on impersonal, technical rules. Perhaps it is also that apparently distant, impersonal forms of control are more direct and arbitrary than Foucault's analyses reveal. There might be considerable space for personal revenge and disciplinary acts within a bureaucratic system. The critique forwarded by Alford (2000) and Scott (1990) serves as a warning against an uncritical adoption of Foucault's concept of productive power. His critics point to the value of also ap-

proaching power from a contextual point of view, and they emphasise how domination continues to be ensured through all-embracing means of control and repression. This does not mean, however, that the concept of capillary and productive power is inadequate for explaining the techniques through which power is wielded. For the purposes of understanding the power of the media, productive power turns out to be useful, but it needs to be complemented by a recognition of the existence of other, more direct, modes of power techniques.

The concept of discourse is central to this dissertation, and Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory is inspired by a Foucauldian concept of power. They continue to build on Foucault's work on how discourse transforms the way people describe themselves and their lives, and how institutions consolidate discourses and turn them into truth. The power of discourse is productive because it creates new forms of living and thinking, rather than preventing people from engaging in certain activities. This power inherent in the production of meaning is the main reason why media freedom is limited in authoritarian societies. Through oppositional discourse, humour, and criticism, the media can challenge hegemonic representations in a way authorities find threatening. Laclau and Mouffe emphasise that discursive articulations are always subject to potential change. The meaning attached to social phenomena can always be different, they may appear as 'frozen', but new articulations will align signs in other ways and fill them with different meaning. Within discourse theory, the power of discourses to imbue the social with meaning is at the core of politics, and this reflects a notion of power as productive and always incomplete (Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

It is exactly this incompleteness of power and the potential for rupture and change that turns freedom of expression into a threat in authoritarian societies. As Foucault (1990) describes them, processes of subject formation are discursive, and the power to influence how people conceive of themselves and their surroundings is never neutral. However, as Foucault's critics point out, severe and violent repression continues to be part of every society, restricted to particular institutions in some and apparent as a more general trait in others. In this context power must continue to be studied in a contextual perspective, where its relation to resources and practices remains central. It is concomitantly important to study the structures that uphold and reproduce relations of domination and repression: the next part of this discussion therefore focuses on theories on hegemony and domination as possible explanatory frameworks.

## **HEGEMONY**

Hegemony is one of the concepts within Marxist theory that has inspired post-structuralist and post-Marxist approaches within the social sciences. Hegemonic power relations are characterized by their stability and apparent lack of opposition. Theories of hegemony explore what it is that sets some relations of power apart from others and makes them more resistant to change and subversion. The work of Italian Marxist philosopher Gramsci is an influential source of inspiration for later theories of hegemony, such as Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. Gramsci led the Italian communist party in the period before Mussolini came to power and was imprisoned in 1926. While in jail he wrote texts that focused on hegemony and the relationship between the state, political society and civil society, and these texts later became known as the *Prison*

*notebooks* (Gramsci 1971). In his writings, Gramsci criticized Marxist economism for its tendency to inscribe the economy with explanatory power for developments in every other sphere of society, such as politics and culture. He was particularly critical of versions of Marxism that see capitalism's development as a predetermined movement towards economic crisis and collapse (Simon 1991). Instead, Gramsci turned his attention towards the question of how consent to capitalist exploitation is secured, in particular in democratic states (Lukes 2005). His concept of hegemony was developed as a way of approaching questions about class relations and power. In contrast to more orthodox Marxist thinking, Gramsci's work represents a notion of power that is inscribed with a contextuality which enables it to adapt to different social situations. This emphasis on the contingency of social constellations and the relative autonomy of the political has given his work an enduring influence within Marxist, post-Marxist and post-structuralist approaches to the social sciences. In Gramsci's work, Laclau and Mouffe found a Marxist theory that was less deterministic and that contained a belief in the openness of the social, which they have developed further in their own discourse theory.

Gramsci's work explained hegemony as a relation between classes within a state structure, while discourse theory directs the focus towards hegemonies of meaning. For Gramsci, the durability of power relations depends on how the dominant class incorporates the divergent interests of the subordinated. Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory explains a hegemonic discourse as a way of thinking that becomes naturalized, one that makes other possible ways of conceptualizing the same questions appear to be unlikely and even impossible. A hegemonic discourse is also

constructed in relation to what it is not, through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Both Gramsci's and Laclau and Mouffe's approaches focus on the relational nature of power relations, and they respond by focusing on how power is established and upheld in relations within society.

Gramsci sees inter-class relations as the main conflict line in society. The power of the dominant class depends upon its ability to become hegemonic, but to reach this position it must take into account the interests of other classes as well. Through alliances with other classes and social groups, the dominant class incorporates interests that are contrary to their own in the short run, in order to uphold its power. Hegemony is the result of negotiation between the interests of the ruling class and its subordinates, as a result of which the dominant class obtains the consent of its subordinates to rule. The influence of the subordinated classes on the social structure suggests a political field that is something more than a pure reflection of the economic field. Gramsci's non-foundational understanding of the political is also expressed in his analysis of the state's role. In contrast to previous Marxist theories of the relationship between state and society, Gramsci held that the state was something more than a tool to be used purely in the interest of the dominant class. He argued that the state's role is to create a stable environment for capitalist production, and this is not possible solely through relations characterized by domination. To fulfil its role, the state must become the central institution through which disparate class interests can be negotiated. Gramsci states that the state reflects a balance of forces, and that this demonstrates how the concept of hegemony captures the connection between politics and economy. Ownership of the means of production is not sufficient to establish and naturalize the rule of the dominating class (Simon 1991). Hegemony does

not imply that the conflicting interests of the classes have an equal impact upon the alliances and close relations among other groups within civil society, but hegemony does involve compromise and negotiation (Simon 1991).

Laclau and Mouffe have used Gramsci's concept of hegemony in their pursuit of a perspective on politics that is embedded in the openness of the social. In opposition to deterministic understandings of the social, Laclau and Mouffe insist that any relation and any meaning is potentially changeable. Within Marxist theory, they find Gramsci's thinking to be most compatible with the notion of the openness of the social. In developing a discourse theory Laclau and Mouffe have reformulated Gramsci's concept of hegemony, transforming it from a theory of class to their discourse theory, with the politics of meaning as the focal point. There are two aspects in particular that distinguish Laclau and Mouffe's concept of hegemony from the meaning of hegemony within Gramsci's work: the first is the status of social classes and the second is Gramsci's postulate that there is one single hegemonic centre for each social formation. For Gramsci, hegemony is a relation between social classes, and Laclau and Mouffe characterize his view of hegemonic relations as "syntactic relations founded upon morphological categories which precede them" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001:134). They hold that Gramsci's work acknowledges the openness of the social in the sense that the exact nature of hegemonic relations is contingent, but the pre-determined categories of social classes and society in Gramsci's theory still retain an essentialist core. Further, Laclau and Mouffe argue that an anti-essentialist conception of hegemony excludes the idea of hegemony as the centre and hence the essence of the social. Rather, they choose to look upon hegemony as a political type



of relation; in contrast to Gramsci, who writes about one hegemony within a state, Laclau and Mouffe argue that there may be several hegemonic discourses within the same social formation (Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

Discourse theory focuses on how power relates to the construction of meaning. Hegemony can appear in contexts where the relations of power are undefined, much in the same way as Gramsci depicts hegemony as the result of a process of negotiation between classes. Laclau and Mouffe argue that

The general field of the emergence of hegemony is that of articulatory practices, that is, a field where the 'elements' have not crystallized into 'moments'. In a closed system of relational identities, in which the meaning of each moment is absolutely fixed, there is no place whatsoever for a hegemonic practice.

(Laclau and Mouffe 2001:134)

Hegemony is achieved when an articulation appears to have succeeded in turning the undefined, vague signs, called elements, into fixed relations with other signs, which make them moments (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). This is accomplished through processes in which a discourse that constitutes and organizes social relations in a particular way confronts antagonistic discourses and ends up as the dominant discourse. A discursive hegemony is achieved when a discourse appears as solid, natural and fixed, and has succeeded in establishing certain perspectives as normal and self-evident. In this sense hegemony is defined by its victory over other potential understandings of the social, but Laclau and Mouffe hold that hegemony is equally defined by the instability of the frontiers that separate the hegemonic discourse from the field of alternative and

undefined meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). In Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the nature of the relationship between the dominant class and the subordinate classes is decisive for the political structure. For Laclau and Mouffe, it is the relation between the hegemonic discourse, and the potential other discourses in the same field, that is decisive. A hegemonic discourse does not define itself, just as the dominant class in Gramsci's theory has to take other, divergent interests into account in order to achieve power.

What characterizes the representation of hegemony in the thinking of Gramsci and Laclau and Mouffe is its ability to appear as natural and self-evident. Hegemony prevents opposition, and hegemonic politics are practices aimed at reducing the impact of social antagonisms (Mouffe 2005). For Gramsci, hegemony depends on the ability of the dominant class to incorporate the interests of other classes in order to rule. The result is a balance between social forces that is reflected in the dominant ideology. Hegemony brings about the formation of a collective will that welds different conceptions of the world into a synthesis of class objectives (Simon 1991). The result is a constantly renewed class compromise that reflects the main interests of the dominant class. In states where civil society is strong, and the consent from subordinate classes is high, the ruling authorities will have strong bonds to different groups (class interests) in society, in such a way that subordinate classes also feel that their particular interests are reflected in the rule of the state. In such situations, society can be transformed from the sphere of civil society, through a *war of position* (Simon 1991). In other words, the political sphere represents a source of power in its own right. In situations where civil society is weak, power must be grasped through other means, what Gramsci calls a *war of*

*movement*. Hence, hegemony is protected through consent and coercion, and the degree of each depends upon the particular social context. As a Marxist thinker, Gramsci holds that ideology misrepresents the true relations between classes, and he thinks that revolutionary politics must seek to uncover the true relations between classes. However, Gramsci has a twofold understanding of ideology. On the one hand he depicts it as a discursive phenomenon, but he also argues that ideology is embedded in human practice and has a materiality. The materially embedded ideology provides rules and norms that guide people's practices, and these are not necessarily in line with the philosophical, or conscious ideology in which people believe. While ideological consciousness can be likened to a false consciousness, the embedded ideology that guides people's practices represents a layer of resistance (Simon 1991).

In their effort to avoid essentialism, Laclau and Mouffe distance themselves from any notions of social institutions that in themselves are more foundational, true and durable than other social phenomena. Hegemonic discourses have an appearance that suggests stability and permanence, but they do not conceal any true relations. By treating hegemonic discourses as expressions of power, stability and permanence are politicized, but not essentialized (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). However, in addition to making the term ideology redundant, Laclau and Mouffe also exclude the ambiguity of Gramsci's understanding of ideology. Gramsci leaves open a space for everyday practice and resistance, and this disappears in Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony.

Gramsci's and Laclau and Mouffe's theories of hegemony aim to explain how relations of power are upheld in spite of their repression of other classes or other discourses. They explain the ability to remain in

power not through the relative strength of particular social actors, but through the relations between a dominating class or discourse, and its *other*. What becomes problematic in these explanations is their ability to explain social change. In Gramsci's thinking, in spite of his emphasis on the relative autonomy of the political, the emphasis on social classes means that economic relations carry greater weight. There is a potential for social change attached to his belief in the everyday practice of the oppressed, but as long as the political hegemony remains, the conscious ideology of the oppressed classes contributes to their subordination. For Laclau and Mouffe, the openness of the social means that their belief in the possibility of change is axiomatic. Discourse theory explains that there may be several hegemonic discourses, and this allows for the possibility of competition and change. However, exactly how people, social actors, become able to think and formulate themselves in opposition to hegemonic discourses is less clear. In order to understand the conditional autonomy of the media in a context of repression, it is necessary to grasp how people are able to distance themselves from hegemonic discourses and form counter discourses to express and create opposition. For this purpose, James Scott's insights into domination and resistance may prove helpful.

## **HEGEMONIC STRATEGIES**

The analyses of hegemony developed by Gramsci as well as Laclau and Mouffe seek to investigate how relations of domination remain stable. Their analyses are rather abstract and they are part of more general political theories. Scott's book *Domination and the arts of resistance* (1990) shares their engagement with this question as he discusses how hegem-

ony, in the form of domination, is executed, sustained and challenged. The major difference between Scott's approach to hegemony and that of Gramsci is his denial of the possibility of the fulfilment of hegemonic ambitions: the discourse of the dominant never captures the consciousness of the suppressed. Scott claims that in spite of the countless appearances of domination, ranging from violent repression to subtle and indirect attempts to bend other people's will, there is always conscious resistance. Gramsci was aware that the everyday practice of the subordinate classes contained elements of resistance, but his emphasis was on the influence of the values of the dominant class (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999). In contrast, Scott claims that the elements of resistance in everyday practice reflect conscious strategies of resistance in a situation where people's freedoms are curbed through domination. In contrast to Laclau and Mouffe, the main actors in Scott's narrative are always people. For Laclau and Mouffe, concepts such as 'man', 'people', 'society' are essentialist reductions of the openness of the social (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). By dissolving such concepts they arrive at a productive understanding of politics as articulatory practice, but the actual implications for social practice remain less developed. Scott places the social *practices* of domination and resistance at the heart of his analysis.

If relations of domination are unable to conquer the consciousness of the suppressed, hegemony can never be fully achieved. Scott argues that previous theories of hegemony have failed to recognize the prevalence of conscious resistance among the suppressed. Both far-reaching and more limited theories of hegemony have sought to explain why there are so few revolts, and there are few examples of subordinates' movements that fight to overturn relations of domination. General, or thick, theories of

hegemony convey the argument that the dominant group succeeds in making the inferior class believe in values that explain and justify their subordination. The subordinate class's self perception therefore becomes a false consciousness, as its members believe that the relations that limit their freedom are just, and for their own best. Thin theories of hegemony simply state that when the weak in a social system perceive the situation as inevitable, they simply make the best of a bad situation and endeavour to accept it as their fate. Scott explains this conviction in the abilities of hegemony as a delusion that can be avoided by separating between the *public transcript* and the *hidden transcript*. The public transcript represents the hegemonic discourse of the powerful, and its objective is the naturalization of existing power relations. The hidden transcript, on the other hand, contains the perspectives of the suppressed and their resistance against the prevailing relations of domination. The existence of hidden transcripts suggests that although few open struggles by subordinate groups have been ideologically radical, this has nothing to do with a lack of critical consciousness. The subordinate are fully capable of imagining a world where the power relations between dominant and subordinate are reversed, but the relations of domination require that the hidden transcript can only be revealed among one's peers. The belief that the passivity of the subordinate stems from their convictions about hegemony actually reflects the content of the public transcript, rather than the hidden transcript of the subordinate.

Rather than answering the question of how relations of domination remain stable through the concept of hegemony, Scott attempts to show how the concepts of public and hidden transcripts capture the regulated nature of domination. The open interaction between subordinates and

those who dominate follows a procedure in which each actor knows his part. The public transcript provides directions and connects representations of superiority with signs that communicate servility and subordination. The transcript represents the behaviour of the suppressed as a reflection of a natural respect for those in authority: "It is designed to be impressive, to affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites, and to conceal or euphemize the dirty linen of their rule" (Scott 1990:18). Within the public transcript, the mere existence of a hidden transcript is denied, because the relations between subordinates are exempt from the hegemonic discourse. The subordinates are categorised according to their relations to the dominant, and congregations of subordinates are construed as dangerous and potentially disruptive. Autonomous gatherings of the weak indicate the existence of a hidden transcript, and in the eyes of the powerful, this threatens stability.

In their interaction, it is important for both the dominant and the suppressed to behave in such a way that their inner feelings remain unknown to their counterpart. They both have hidden transcripts. Among the suppressed, the aggression, hatred and contempt people feel when their integrity is ignored and distorted are revealed within the hidden transcript. This hidden transcript also contains elements that make it possible to survive as an oppressed individual, such as information on how to survive and escape the violence of those who dominate. Physical posture, movements, facial expressions and verbal sensitivity are required to avoid negative or dangerous attention, and this behaviour is represented as a necessary means of survival for the subordinate in their interactions with the dominant. Ridicule, humour, and caricatures of oppressors are ubiquitous everywhere people suffer oppression, often without being

visible to those who dominate. There may be occasions where the public transcript breaks down and the hidden becomes visible, but in the day to day regulation of relations of domination, the hidden transcript is restricted to people who are likely to share the experience of oppression or domination. Among those who dominate, there will also be a hidden transcript, revealing their internal difficulties and their weaknesses as a group, but given their position a large share of their interests can simply be revealed within the public transcript. Both groups have an interest in keeping their transcripts hidden, and it is the directions within the public transcript that regulate the interplay between those who dominate and the oppressed (Scott 1990).

#### THE SYMBOLIC REALM OF DOMINATION

Scott distinguishes between practices of domination and the symbolic realm in contexts of domination, but states that changes in the balance of power within the symbolic realm have material consequences.

A good part of the maintenance work consists of the symbolization of domination by demonstrations and enactments of power. Every visible, outward use of power – each command, each act of deference, each list and ranking, each ceremonial order, each public punishment, each use of an honorific or a term of derogation – is a symbolic gesture of domination that serves to manifest and reinforce a hierarchical order.

(Scott 1990:45)

Deference is a necessary aspect of domination, and can be expressed in gestures or words. Any pattern of stratification will indicate who gives orders and who receives them, and those at each level defer to those higher up. Small physical movements, or the way a statement is phrased



can work as signs that confirm and uphold relations of domination. The importance of the daily routines of deference means that small ceremonies, such as the peasant who removes his cap in the presence of the landlord, are as important as the big parades of National Day celebrations. Everyday practices such as companies' constant monitoring of industrial employees, substantiate the relations of domination and contribute to confirming and reconstituting relations of rank and power (Scott 1990). In authoritarian states, the media's day-to-day favourable portrayals of political leaders contribute to a similar process: the naturalization of the political status quo.

In Scott's analyses symbols of domination play a role that can be likened to the role of ideology in Gramsci's work: they normalize patterns of domination that keep people oppressed. Scott's examples and analyses deal mostly with situations characterized by face-to-face interaction between oppressors and the dominated. However, due to Scott's emphasis on the symbolic realm of domination, there are many aspects of his work that can contribute to an understanding of practices of domination within an authoritarian state. The role of unanimity is one example of the regulation of domination that is present both in direct, interpersonal relations and in the more structural regulation of domination within a state. Unanimity is important for groups in power because any indication of disputes and conflicts within the dominating group can be exploited by the oppressed. This means that the elite must be represented as a unified group, but the effect of unanimity is even stronger if it includes subordinates as well. This is similar to Gramsci's understanding of hegemony, where the elite gains its strength through the partial inclusion of the interests of the dominated classes, thereby creating an impression of politi-

cal unanimity (Simon 1991). Representations of unanimity impose the need to handle conflicts carefully. For instance, a landowner who is challenged by his tenants would rather meet with his tenants individually than in a group, in order to avoid displaying an open conflict. The landowner fears the infectiousness of open conflicts, because insubordination by some tenants might inspire revolt among others (Scott 1990). Within an authoritarian state, resistance that remain unknown to the general public does not necessarily represent a threat to the relations of domination. This makes control of and through the media decisive for the state's attempt at legitimacy. The media is also of vital importance in situations where practical resistance has come out in the open. In such cases it is crucial for the dominant part that there be a public response to restore the balance of power (Scott 1990).

Representations of unanimity can be more important than actual unanimity, because the discursive aspects of domination are vital for upholding the relations of domination. The oppressed groups in society have to judge the strength of the dominant part on the basis of the public transcript. This means that it is in the interest of the dominant part to ensure that the public transcript represents them in a manner that prevent subordinates from escalating their resistance. Signs of weakness and vulnerability must be removed from the transcript, but as long as the pattern of domination is not openly threatened, substantial changes in social practice can be accommodated. This means that there will be situations where the symbolic realm does not correspond to changes in social practice, but rituals of subordination do not necessarily rely on their ability to convince their audiences of their veracity. Subordinates' participation in the spectacles designed by the dominant part does not have to be sincere to

have an impact, because their lack of consent does not prevent the rituals of domination from demonstrating that the system is stable and that there are no likely alternatives. Scott uses the fake cooperatives in the agricultural sector in Laos as an example. Farmers and the lower echelons of the cadres knew they were fantasy, but their lack of belief did not represent a threat as long as the spectacle worked independent of its veracity. Ideologically, parades, propaganda, and fake cooperatives can be very successful because they contain a vision of how things ought to be, and contribute to the construction of a cohesive ideology. Another aspect of a spectacle directed by the elite is the legitimizing effect it has within the group. The display of the public transcript is a reassurance of their position. Public signs of dissent within the elite, or the dominating group, represent a risk, because they threaten the naturalization of power on which their domination depends on.

A central question then becomes how symbolic expressions that counter the balance of power are to be interpreted. For the media in authoritarian states, this is what happens when unfavourable aspects of state and society are exposed in spite of restrictions on the freedom of expression. Historically, fairytales, humour and art are forms of expression in which the oppressed have expressed their longing for an altered balance of power. Visions of a reversal of the relations of domination are also enacted in festivals such as Carnival. Carnival represents an intermediate upheaval of everyday life that allows people to feel what their world could be like if the pattern of domination was changed. It is a short period of upheaval of the relations of domination which is followed by their re-establishment. Carnival does not lead to a fundamental change in the relations of domination, and this is why carnival is often interpreted

as a safety valve instigated by the elite as a controlled action, with the aim of letting off steam. Scott (1990) refers to this as the hydraulic metaphor: the pressure that builds up under injustice is likened to the steam that would finally cause an explosion were it not for the safety valve. A similar interpretation of critical media practices in an authoritarian context would be that the state allowed a certain amount of critical exposure with the purpose of avoiding more severe resistance.

The safety valve interpretation is a rather functionalist reading of a complex social event. It is problematic because it ascribes agency only to one side, the elite. For instance, if the dominant part set up Carnival to allow their subordinates to play and pretend, it would make sense. This is contradicted by the actual history of Carnival, which is a story of social conflict where the agency of the suppressed has been decisive for the development of Carnival. To be able to let off steam does not render people meek and passive; if that were the case, elites would encourage Carnival or similar festivals in situations of conflict, when the elite wish people would calm down.

Rather, Carnival and other expressions of the subordinates' longing for the overthrow of the relations of domination can better be understood as sites for various forms of conflicts expressed through rituals and symbolic manipulation. The aggression displayed is more likely to function as preparation for open displays of resistance. In this sense, Carnival is a political message in disguise. In contexts of domination, subordinates' political messages must be cryptic or concealed in order to prevent punishment (Scott 1990). In repressive regimes, the media's critical practice is more likely to be an expression of a power that is wrested from the repressive state, than a safety valve instigated by the political elite to let out steam.

Strategic use of language is a key element of expressing resistance. Public representations in conflict situations are strategic and they must be formulated in a manner that prevents them from being blocked. One common example of strategic use of language is when the suppressed use the hegemonic language of the dominating elite. By referring to hegemonic values, the dominant is more likely to be obliged to listen: "The conflict will accordingly take a dialogic form in which the language of the dialogue will invariably borrow heavily from the terms of the dominant ideology prevailing in the public transcript" (Scott 1990:102). In feudal societies subordinates' approach to their masters made use of a language filled with formulations stressing the receiver's benevolence and greatness. A parallel situation occurs in capitalist enterprises when employees argue for a raise and point to their efficiency, loyalty and contributions to the firm as arguments. Slaves used the paternalist discourse of their owners to enhance better living conditions (Scott 1990). Similarly, a state's discourse about human rights can be used by human rights organizations to achieve their goals (Sasaoka 2004). Strategic use of language does not tell us what the subordinate are thinking. The conflict of interests may be urgent, but the power relations involved make it necessary for the subordinate to engage in a dialogue with the dominant. By making appeals that remain within the hegemonic language, the danger of being punished for them might be lessened. The strategic use of language is the subordinate's creative utilization of the public transcript and is a necessary form of risk-aversion. Careful use of language, use of stock formulas and careful formulations to avoid offending authorities in a direct manner are all discursive techniques employed in practices of resistance (Scott 1990).

Scott's concepts of the public and the hidden transcripts contradict Gramsci's theory of hegemony, since the existence of the hidden transcript means that the values of the dominant never conquer the consciousness of the subordinate. If the behaviour of the subordinate indicates the opposite, it is due to the requirements written into the public transcript. The concept of the hidden transcript points towards the capacity for social agency among subordinates, and their will to rewrite the relations of domination. The hidden transcript means that subordinates are capable of imagining a reversal of the pattern of domination.

The above discussion of the concepts of power, hegemony and domination has aimed to illustrate their contributions to an analysis of the politics of meaning and the possibilities of political agency in contexts of domination. This discussion shows that power used to be understood as an instrumental concept denoting individual actors' ability to decide the outcome of conflicts. However, for the purpose of analysing the conditional autonomy of the media in a context of domination, power needs to be conceptualized in a way that includes the power of discourse in shaping people's outlook on the world. This does not necessarily exclude a conception of power as something that is related to material resources. In a similar way, hegemony is a concept that has travelled from a Marxist context, expressing a particular relationship between classes, to a post-structuralist framework, where it denotes discourses that achieve a position as natural or as representing common sense. For the concepts of power and hegemony, this means that they have each incorporated a discursive meaning that has redefined their original, materialist content. This does not imply that discursive power is necessarily more indirect and less violent than other hegemonic strategies. Relations of domination

are conducted through various means, but they acquire their meaning from the threat of violent repression.

## **DOMINATING SPACE**

As previously discussed, conceptions of discursive and material practices of domination and resistance both have their weaknesses. Discursive approaches can be criticized for advocating a perspective that seems devoid of social actors, while more materialist perspectives often lose sight of the power of language and mediation. In the final pages of this chapter, I suggest that discussing domination and resistance in relation to spatiality better enables us to keep both the discursive and the material aspects of domination and resistance in mind.

Spatial discourses construe a particular vision upon the social world. Through our spatial vocabularies we divide space into centres and peripheries, into local and global, and we attach meaning to these signs. The way we talk and think about space has material consequences. Spatial discourses facilitate some acts, and make others less likely, but spatial materiality also shapes our discourses. Borders are a pre-eminent example of the reciprocity between spatial discourses and practices. Borders are material lines of division in the landscape, they regulate the movement of people, and they are also important signifiers shaping social identities of belonging (Paasi 1999).

Processes of domination and resistance are always underway somewhere, and they are embedded in a social, economic and political context. Their contextuality affects the meaning of signs in both discursive and material practices. Every sign acquires meaning in relation to what it is not, so the contextuality of social processes means that identical acts or

statements carry different meaning in different places. The word context carries connotations of interwoven threads, of the material surrounding the textual, and of the information that is necessary in order to understand something else. Contextuality is spatial in the sense that it locates the surrounding phenomena of a text. This has consequences for how particular political phenomena can be analysed, and how they can be changed. Without contextual knowledge, it is hard to contribute to social change, because outsiders do not fully recognize the particular meaning of signs or actions. Analysing contextuality in spatial terms is also a way of acknowledging the partiality of every perspective. According to Haraway (1996), this will contribute to more responsible and accountable research practices. Admitting the situatedness and partiality of every perspective is the opposite of representations of the world where the vision is portrayed as unrestricted and unmarked by particularities. This is highly relevant when the issue at stake is understanding and advocating democratizing social and political practices (Slater 2001).

Domination and repression are spatial practices. Borders and boundaries are integrated in practices of inclusion and exclusion, and the organization of state power is a pre-eminent example of the spatiality of power. States' spatial practices of mapping and planning are central for acquiring the knowledge about society that is necessary to establish control with the population. For Lefebvre, processes of modernization have been incited by more refined spatial practices (Lefebvre 1991). A central aspect of modernity has been the bureaucratization of space and through space. This means that concrete space is being compartmentalized, divided into units that facilitate surveillance and discipline. The result is that everyday life is colonized through the bureaucratization and commodification of



space. Lefebvre identifies the state as the central actor in establishing domination of space.

Society is subjected to state power through the state's political practices, and Lefebvre asks rhetorically whether "(i)t is conceivable that the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouched? Could space be nothing more than the passive locus of social relations (...)" (Lefebvre 1991:11). He answers negatively, claiming that space serves hegemony, and that with the help of knowledge and technology, space plays a central, operational role in the constitution of social systems. Massey (1993) shows how space often discursively is represented as passive. Space becomes the opposite of politics, and this common understanding is a powerful resource for states' rule of their societies. In the same way that a hegemonic discourse gains its power from appearing natural, legitimate and simply representing common sense, the domination of space draws its power from the status of the spatial as the passive background for social processes. Lefebvre's aims to reveal this, for instance through his demonstration of the political nature of planning as a social practice. The 1960s discourse of planning conceived of space as given. City planners construed planned space as objective and pure, and they ascribed to it a scientific status which meant that it was also conceived of as neutral and apolitical (Lefebvre 1978).

In these works [by urban planners], urban space, which was formerly discussed in connection with land utilization or the overall community culture, was isolated from the contexts; it appeared as a given, as a specific dimension of decision-making and only secondarily with social needs which were considered localized.

(Lefebvre 1978:340)

To Lefebvre, planning and building are intrinsically political, and the built and the landscape are sediments of different periods and different political regimes. Modernity is characterized by a decorporealization of space and time, resulting in a particular spatiality. Modernist urban planners see the city from above, employing what Haraway (1996) calls the god-eye, a vision from above that stands in stark contrast to embodied community practices. The view from above is a defining feature of modernity, manifested in the practices of city planners, cartographers, economists and politicians who see society as spatial patterns or numbers. Through this vision, abstract space is imposed on everyday life, and takes the form of technologies of power which are used to produce useful and passive bodies (Gregory 1994).

Scott's book *"Seeing like a state"* (1998) investigates the spatial strategies states employ in establishing control over their populace. He argues that the legibility of society is crucial for the purpose of effectively implementing state power. Similar to Lefebvre, Scott identifies control over space as a foundation of modernity. While Lefebvre discusses this within the frames of the production of space in a capitalist economy, Scott highlights the question of vision as decisive for the domination of space. The modern state's vision can be likened to the god's eye, the unrestricted view from above, and this is the vision reproduced in practices of mapping. Oversight and control are closely connected, and the production of legible representations of the world is followed by strategies to make society more orderly and easily accessible from the outside. As an example, Scott contrasts the aerial perspective of the city layout of towns constructed in the Middle Ages with the view of modern cities such as Chicago. Seen from above, the former will give a chaotic and disorderly im-

pression, while Chicago's ground plan is easily legible. Its streets have straight lines and right angles, and this makes services and acts such as transportation, identifying and finding felons hiding in the city, providing water pipes and sewers much easier than in the tortuous, winding streets of the Middle Age town. An important point in this process is that legibility in itself becomes a question about point of view, because what seems chaotic from above can be perfectly legible to a local person on the ground. The question of vision and legibility is connected to the modern state's ambition to be able to transform the everyday life of its population from the outside. The planning of cities such as Chicago was motivated by ambitions to make the city a modern, clean and well-functioning place to live, thereby fostering social and economic development.

People who for different reasons have not easily adapted to the regulations laid down by the state, have often found themselves targets of state repression. Typically travelling people, such as nomads without fixed addresses, are categorized as a problem when they refuse to correspond to the spatial schema established by the state. States' efforts to make mobile people settle at permanent addresses are also part of the state's attempts at making society legible. The extended powers of modern states depend on oversight and access in order to rule, so conquering the power of spatiality has been at the heart of the state's modernizing project.

Some of the gravest examples of states' attempts at dominating space in order to control the population can be found within "authoritarian high modernism" (Scott 1998:87). According to Scott, four factors in combination are responsible for historical catastrophes, such as the Great Leap forward in China. First, there must be an administrative organiza-

tion of nature and society, employing the means of modern statecraft. Second, it requires a high modernist ideology, with a strong belief in scientific and technical progress. Third, an authoritarian state is needed to implement such grand schema; the fourth factor is a prostrate civil society that is incapable of resisting the state's policies. The Great Leap forward was launched in 1958 and involved the establishing of self-sufficient people's communes throughout rural China. This policy contributed to mass starvation and economic collapse in the countryside (Lieberthal 1995). It is important to keep in mind that projects such as the Great Leap forward were designed to bring society forward, to help people by spurring economic growth. When they go so fatally wrong, it is because they are instigated and implemented by elites who have no commitment to democracy and therefore are willing to use unbridled state power to achieve the goals they believe necessary (Scott 1998).

Lefebvre's view of state power has much in common with Scott's analysis of the high modernist schemes of authoritarian states. Lefebvre sees the state as a piece of heavy machinery, flattening everything underneath it, using rationality, knowledge and technology as its means (Lefebvre 1991). However, both Lefebvre and Scott are aware of the potential of resistance against the state's domination of space.

#### SPACES OF REPRESENTATION

Practices of resistance and practices of domination both contribute to the production of space. To capture the different layers of the meaning of the spatial, Lefebvre constructed a conceptual triad of social space. The two first components of the triad are the *spatial practice* and the *representations of space*. These are central for the domination of space conducted by the

state and the capitalist economy. The potential for resistance against the domination of space is located within the third part of the triad, which is the *spaces of representation*. The spatial practice is the source of a society's space, and is constituted by the everyday routines of the members of society. This dimension is characterised as the perceived space and includes the built environment and infrastructure that enable the everyday reality of that society (Lefebvre 1991). The spatial practice is a stabilising and conserving aspect of human practice, something that is reflected in its status as the common-sense understanding of space (Simonsen 2005).

The representations of space form the conceptualized space, the discursive domain, where scientists, planners and social engineers develop their language of space as a system of verbal signs (Lefebvre 1991). Employing Scott's terminology, the representations of space make up part of the public transcript, describing relations of domination as just and necessary (Scott 1990). The particular representations developed by planners and social engineers advocate solutions intended to improve living conditions through the built environment, but in doing so they impose a certain order, and rule out or reduce the diversity of forms of life. In discursive terms, the representations of space function as the hegemonic discourse, the naturalized and politically powerful representation of how things "really are". Through representations of space, the commodification and bureaucratization of concrete space appear as natural.

The spaces of representation are the spaces that are directly lived, through which the dominated space is appropriated by its subjects (Lefebvre 1991). Simonsen (2005) explains Lefebvre's notion of the spaces of representation as a terrain in which people struggle to realise themselves as total persons by conceptualizing alternative imaginations of space. In

other words, the spaces of representation challenge the hegemonic representations of space, but according to Lefebvre, they do so in a non-verbal way. It is through the lived experience that the dominated space is altered and reclaimed. In a sense it seems that the resistance that is played out within the spaces of representation is an unintentional form of resistance, as he writes that this is the space of those “such as a few writers and philosophers, who *describe* and aspire to do no more than describe” (Lefebvre 1991:39, emphasis in original). In Lefebvre’s thinking, the representational spaces are not primarily a discursive domain, as it is the experience of directly lived space that appropriates space. This notion of resistance is similar to Gramsci’s understanding of resistance as the unconscious, non-conforming behaviour of the oppressed classes (Lukes 2005). While their consciousness is dominated by the hegemonic discourses, their bodily, everyday behaviour still contains elements of resistance. Lefebvre continues this distinction through a separation of verbal and non-verbal symbols and signs, where the domination of space is conducted through verbal signs (the representation of space) and resistance is limited to the realm of the non-verbal, within the spaces of representation. This is in line with Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and resistance, and it makes Scott’s critique of Gramsci also relevant to Lefebvre’s understanding of resistance. Scott argues that there is no such thing as a false consciousness which renders people silent. People do recognize that they are being dominated, and they are able to express their resistance consciously, in verbal as well as non-verbal signs. However, vocal protest and resistance is often limited to the hidden transcript, to avoid the high costs connected to voicing resistance in the open (Scott 1990).

Lefebvre's focus on the lived spatiality, the body and the production of space is an important addition to the theoretical perspectives employed in this dissertation. Post-structural and post-Marxist theories, such as discourse theory, provide valuable insight into the construction and changes of the social world. These theories, however, still have more to say about structures than they do about actors. Through his concept of the *spaces of representation* Lefebvre's conceptual triad places an emphasis on how the lived reality can offer the potential for social change. If Lefebvre's concept of the spaces of representation is extended also to include the verbal resistance and counter discourses that challenge the hegemonic representation of space, it may extend our understanding of how resistance occurs in contexts of domination.

To see how resistance against the domination of space takes place, it is important to understand how people who suffer under domination *use* space and spatial strategies in order to counter the restrictions imposed on their agency. Bhabha suggests that the two concepts of *signification* and *institutionalization* can be of use in identifying such resistance (Bhabha 1992). Signification is the process of inscribing signs with meaning. It is a contextual practice, depending on social and linguistic codes established between people. Institutionalization is the process whereby language use is embedded in material practices. When the processes of signification and institutionalization are analysed together, this incorporates both the discursive and the material aspects of resistance.

One strategy of resistance discussed in the work of Lefebvre (1991) as well as by Scott (1998) is the upholding of diversity in the face of state power. Lefebvre argues that resistance against the domination of space can be found in the everyday practices of social actors, practices that

counter the homogenizing tendencies of modernity. To Bhabha (1992), the marginal experiences of people whose identities do not fit into one of the major categories constitute a rich source for investigations into potential resistance against homogenizing spatial strategies. When dominated people express their lived experience, they produce discourses that counter the hegemonic representations advocated by the state and other authorities.

Within the hidden transcript, discursive representations of space may also serve more instrumental purposes. Scott (1990) describes how slaves have utilized the paternalist discourse of their owners to improve their living conditions. Similar strategies can be employed in spatial discourse. For instance, when the hegemonic discourse of space employs the binary opposition centre/periphery, and attaches connotations such as strong/weak, powerful/insignificant to this opposition, this can be used for purposes of political mobilization. In Keith and Pile's formulation "discourses ostentatiously marked with their spatiality are conventionally assumed to be narrow-minded, bounded – coming complete with a self-confessed specificity that, it is frequently assumed, restricts their relevance" (Keith and Pile 1993:16). These hegemonic understandings of space can be co-opted by social actors in an authoritarian state, who consciously frame their requests in a way that make them appear as local, limited and therefore less threatening. Such strategies involve a political and strategic use of scale.

Scale is understood as the spatial levels that constitute the hierarchy of space, such as urban, regional, national and global (Howitt 2003). Whereas most of the literature about the social production of scale is positioned within the political economy tradition, Jones (1998) represents an



attempt to understand scale as a representational practice. In her analysis, she employs a case study originally described by Cox (1998). In Chackmore, an English village, there was a land use conflict where the national need for the local mineral resources made local resistance difficult. However, the local opposition group finally won the case by transferring the case from an economic and industrial discourse to an alternative discourse of national heritage which focused on a unique, local landscape. They re-represented the question at issue, and won the conflict. In this case, both representations of the conflict aligned it with the national scale, underscoring how scale is a complex concept that cannot be reduced to geographic level.

Spatial politics such as the conflict in Chackmore have often been analysed as a question about jumping between scales. Since the local is usually construed as less powerful than the national level, it is not surprising that jumping between scales usually is seen as a political powerful strategy if the questions in case can be upscaled. Upscaling and downscaling as political processes have frequently been discussed within regulation theory, where a common argument is that globalization causes a hollowing out of the state (Cox 2002). However, when questions of scale are extended outside the political economy framework, it is evident that jumping scales does not necessarily involve upscaling (Jones 1998), but rather a conscious utilization of the discursive connotations attached to various spatial scales. For instance, the representation of the local as powerless and particular can be used by political actors who want their case to appear innocent and of lesser importance.

### *Summing up*

This chapter has addressed the question of how political processes of resistance can take place in contexts of domination. The first part of the chapter asks what the potential democratizing role of the media in authoritarian states is. In liberal democracies, the media's role as a watchdog is thought to protect civil society against the abuse of power by the state and to keep government and other authorities in check. In authoritarian states, the media's role is often assumed to be of little importance since it is being part of a repressive state apparatus. The argument put forward in this chapter is that this scenario is too simple to capture the democratizing potential of media in China. It suggests that the media's conditional autonomy must be analysed through the context's social and discursive media practices. A discursive perspective that focuses on media content sheds light on how the media can create new spaces of representation that contribute to processes of democratization.

The importance of discursive strategies is decisive for understanding how critical journalists within the Chinese media are able to put forward other perspectives than the ones favoured by the party-state authorities. This raises the question of what characterizes the power of the media in a context of domination. In this discussion, a range of theoretical conceptions of power and hegemony are key. The conceptualizations under discussion incorporate a theoretical turn from materialist theories of social science to more discursive approaches that take the power of language and signs into consideration. Hegemonic strategies and resistance are conducted in a discursive field as well as materially. In contexts of domination, resistance often takes forms other than political mass mobilization, and investigating spatial practices and discourses can show how

political agency takes place, in spite of repressive state policies. Space is often represented as the neutral background of politics, but in order to analyse critical press in China, it is necessary to see that critical journalists have carved out a new political role, employing spatial strategies that help them create new spaces of representation.

## Chapter three

### **Meaning, materiality and the research process**

The objective of this project about the conditional autonomy of the critical press in China is to gain an understanding of how critical journalism, as a social and discursive practice, works within the discursive order of the Chinese media. The dissertation's research questions are directed at explaining how journalists' production of discourse is structured, and how journalists actively work to increase their freedom of action through discursive and social practices. To study this, I have conducted interviews with journalists, editors and researchers who are in some way connected to the field of critical journalism, and have analysed critical media discourse through newspaper articles.

The interviews focus on the context of critical journalism in China, involving power relations, the economy and working conditions. They explain how journalists experience the regulation of critical journalism, how they counter repression through practices of resistance and "toeing the line". The discourse analysis of newspaper articles shows how the critical media discourse on social problems in China accommodates different voices and discursive elements. Through this discourse analysis, I have approached the newspaper articles not as the sovereign products of jour-

nalists and editors, but as a discourse constituted by certain conditions of possibility.

In this project, the combination of interviews and discourse analysis incorporates a tension between the structuralist legacy of discourse theory and analysis and the more agency-oriented study of social practices. This chapter investigates the methodological implications of combining analysis of discourse and social practice. In the discussion below I first address critical realism and discourse theory as two approaches that emphasise materiality and meaning, respectively, before continuing on to examine some of the central concepts in semiotic and discursive approaches to meaning and representations. In the final part of the chapter I discuss the research process for this study, in particular fieldwork and the process of becoming familiar with foreign codes.

### **'THE REAL' AND DISCOURSE**

Over the last twenty years human geographers have engaged with the philosophy of critical realism in a serious way. Sayer (1992, Sayer 2000) has played a decisive role in developing a particular understanding of critical realism, inspired by the work of the philosopher Bhaskar (Mäki and Oinas 2004). For my work, critical realism has played a role as a defining 'other' that has inspired reflection on the theoretical relation between meaning and materiality and the methodological implications of emphasising meaning.

Critical realism has a strong ontology and a weak epistemology. It asks how the world is, rather than asking how knowledge about the world can be acquired (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen and Karlsson 1997). The theoretical foundation of critical realism is that there is a real

world existing independently of our notions of it. The critical realist ontology is layered and consists of the empirical, the actual and the real or deep (Sayer 1992). The appeal of critical realism within the field of human geography has been due in part to its post-positivist stance, which distances it from a naïve empiricism. The major strength of critical realism is that it outlines a post-Marxist approach that is more open towards the political and less biased towards economic reductionism, while retaining an emphasis on the structuring of the social.

The importance of ontology within critical realism suggests an engagement with materiality rather than meaning. Sayer argues that in order to understand the material, real world, researchers must do more than simply demonstrate statistical relationships. They must ask qualitative questions and investigate *why* things happen. Language and ideas play a part in explaining why people act as they do, and social structures include conventions, rules and systems of meaning. In effect, meaning is included as a causal factor within the realist ontology (Sayer 1992). This reduces the incompatibility of the critical realist philosophy of science and discursive approaches. Critical discourse analysis, as Fairclough (1995) outlines it, and the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (2001), are both post-Marxist approaches that see the world as discursively structured. Sayer subscribes to their view of discourse as central when he states that “there is no contradiction involved in accepting both that there is a world existing independently of our thoughts and that we can only know what it is like from within discourse” (Sayer 2000:41). The implications of this view, however, are understood differently from the perspective of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory than in critical realism. Within discourse theory, the presumption that our access to the world

occurs through language means there is no privileged position that is outside discourse, from which the social world can be analysed and measured. Sayer, on the other hand, argues for a more limited view of discourse. He argues that since knowledge is fallible, the power of language does not undermine the realist stance: "the common experience of making empirical errors, of mistaking the nature of the world, supports rather than undermines realism" (Sayer 1992:67). Nevertheless, discourse theory and critical realism both share the underlying assumption of a material world existing independently of our knowledge of it, and both assume that the only way we can grasp this world independent of us is through language.

During the process of doing fieldwork and analysis for this study, it has become clear that a more nuanced perspective on human practices is missing from both critical realist and discursive approaches to social science. As post-Marxist approaches, they share an emphasis on structure, meaning that their understanding of subject positions is more developed than their perspectives on people's capacities to influence the structures around them. Hence it is possible to overcome the theoretical challenge of combining theoretical approaches accentuating either meaning or materiality, but this combined approach will have a bias towards structure, at the expense of a more profound understanding of practice.

Within discourse analysis, however, the focus on the *use* of language provides an opening towards more nuanced perspectives on practice. Simonsen (2001) argues that Wittgenstein's philosophy of language also is a philosophy of practice, in that Wittgenstein sees language as a medium for social practice and as a precondition for the constitution of subjectivity. This view of language as constitutive for the social is incorpo-

rated into phenomenological approaches to the social, where it is combined with a view of social practice as bodily. Within the field of human geography, this strand of social theory has been particularly important for research on the practices of daily life, but geographical discussions of the relationship between the body and space have led towards a more general insight into the situated and contextual nature of social practice (Simonsen 2001).

### **REPRESENTATION AND THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING**

This study of the conditional autonomy of the critical press in China is concerned with the politics of representation. At the centre stand the discursive politics which relate to the way Chinese journalists represent social problems. The section below deals with concepts from theories of representation and semiotics that have influenced theories of discourse and shaped my understanding of the construction of meaning.

Theories of representation can be divided into three groups: the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist approaches. The *reflective* approach is sometimes termed 'mimetic'; it holds that meaning is in the object and that language only serves as a mirror (Hall 1997). This is a perspective on representation and language that has been connected to positivist approaches to science. Logical positivists aimed at purifying the scientific language of inaccuracies through meticulous and correct formulation of statements (Smith 1998). *Intentional* approaches to representation are based on the observation that in most cases communication works quite well. This observation is taken to mean that words and statements in general reflect the intentions of the sender. *Constructionist* theories of representation defy the possibility of a pure and scientific language, and



sees language as constitutive of meaning itself. The stability of linguistic systems and meaning is explained through the social codes that regulate the relation between signs and their meaning (Hall 1997).

The concept of the sign is central to constructionist theories of representation. The recognition of the role of signs in communication has meant that not only verbal language, but also body language, fashion, photography and other forms of expression can be read as signs. The approach which reads such various expressions as signs connected by a social code has developed out of the work of Saussure (1986). His major interest was in the foundational problems of linguistics, and he developed a theory based on a view of language as a system of signs. Saussure's groundbreaking insight was that the sign consists of two parts: there is the form, that can be a written word, a photo or a sound, and there is the corresponding concept. Saussure term the form the *signifier* and the corresponding concept the *signified* (Hall 1997). Both elements are necessary in order to produce meaning. The relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, meaning that any form can be combined with any concept (Hall 1997). The difference between the denotation of concepts in different languages shows this clearly: in Norwegian 'dog' is *hund*, in Chinese people say *gou*. The sign in itself does not possess a fixed meaning; it acquires its meaning through a system of difference. The colour white acquires its meaning from being different from black and other colours, and being a teenager signalizes difference from adults, children and the old. Signs are members of a system, and are defined through their relations to other members of that system (Culler 1976). When Saussure's thoughts are reproduced in a dissertation in human geography a hundred years after they were launched in a course for his students, it is

because modified versions of his ideas constitute some of the cornerstones in later post-structural theories about language and politics. Saussure himself was a structuralist whose ambition was to discover the scientific laws behind linguistic practices. His work deals with language as a system. To him, the realization of language through speech acts only constitutes the surface of language, and is not suited for systematic analysis. In contrast post-structural approaches to representation focus on the dynamic and changing aspects of language revealed in speech acts, abandoning Saussure's ambition to uncover the scientific laws of language (Hall 1997).

Saussure's view of language as a system of difference and his insights into the nature of the sign have been developed within the field of semiotics, the study of signs. Within semiotics, there is an emphasis on how the understanding of signs depends on an underlying code (Hall 1997). A red traffic light is a sign, which people in general understand to mean stop. This is because we share a common code where the colour red means stop, while green says go. Many social codes are less universal and stable than the codes for traffic lights. In *Mythologies*, Barthes (1991) shows how features of everyday life, such as soap powder commercials, wine and bloody steaks, are not only things in themselves, but also function as signs that activate a chain of connotations within a particular cultural code. Connotations can mould the sign to the extent that it becomes an empty signifier that is able to assume new meanings (Smith 1998). Material practices as well as linguistic practices bear meaning, and meaning changes as signs are connected in new ways through different social codes. These processes are at the centre of the discourse theory and analysis which is applied in this study of the critical press in China.

## POST-STRUCTURALIST DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Semiotics was developed as a structuralist approach to language and meaning. In Saussure's view, that the rules of language are embedded in social codes and shared understandings within a culture made it clear that language could not be an individual matter. His interest was the study of the language system, *langue*, and not the actual use of language, *parole*, which he conceived as too influenced by the whims and idiosyncrasies of individuals (Hall 1997). Within post-structuralism, more attention has subsequently been transferred from the language system to language use (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999). The structuralist notion of the language system as a closed totality has been criticized and the post-structuralist trend has been to investigate how identities are subject to change, and how all structural arrangements contain elements of radical undecidability (Laclau 1993). Laclau summarizes this as the study of the "permanent slide of the signified under the signifier" (Laclau 1993:432). Formulated in more vernacular language, it means meaning is unstable.

Discourse analysis is a method for identifying and analysing the contingency of meaning. In this dissertation, I use elements from three different approaches to discourse analysis. These are Foucault's discourse analysis (Foucault 1995, 1999), Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe 2001) and the critical discourse analysis developed in the work of Fairclough (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, Fairclough 1992, 1995). Foucault's work has been formative for the development of post-structuralist discourse analysis. His work shows how fundamental changes in social practices can be traced back to discursive breaks, such as the establishment of asylums for the insane. Foucault describes a discourse as "a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same dis-

cursive formation (...) it is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined (Foucault 1972:117)". This description emphasises that discourses are established through rules of exclusion, such as the division between the legal and the prohibited, between reason and folly, true and false. When they separate relevant from irrelevant and true from false, discursive boundaries establish a set of conditions of existence (Foucault 1972). Within this perspective, truth and knowledge become relative and dependent on discursive paradigms. This is an aspect of post-structuralist discourse analysis that often provokes reactions because it breaks with the correspondence criterion for truth, and opponents tend to point out that you will be hurt if you run out in front of a car, no matter what discourse you use (Sayer 2000). The objective of Foucault's work is not to propound a belief in the magic of language, but to acquire an understanding of how discourse works within the *social* world. In society, discourses are embedded in material structures. The conception of madness developed along with the asylum, the discourse on crime is embedded in the physical structure of prisons and courts (Simons 1995). This makes discursive paradigms quite resistant to change.

Foucault's notion of discourse is connected to historical eras, while Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory is an attempt to understand politics and power through an analysis of how our conception of the social is constructed (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). They "...will call *articulation* any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call *discourse*" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). The sign is the basic element in Laclau and Mouffe's con-

cept of discourse. The sign acquires its meaning in relation to other signs; through articulations, signs are linked together in ways which establish their meaning. For instance, the concept of 'childhood' is woven together with signs such as 'education', 'care' and 'playtime', and through a particular articulation, these signs together constitute a discourse on children and childhood. The signs within a discourse are placed in a relational system, and this system is never closed. When new elements are incorporated into a discourse, the particular articulation is destabilized, and new relations appear between signs. Discursive changes alter the meaning inscribed in the social, and this contingency of meaning is at the core of Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of politics. The formation of a new discourse on media is what is taking place within the media field in China today. Market reform has destabilized the previous media discourse and new elements, such as critical journalism, are changing the prevailing understanding of what the media is and does.

The third approach to discourse used in this dissertation is critical discourse analysis (CDA). This approach has been developed mainly through the work of Fairclough (1992, 1995, (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999)). The term *critical* signals an engagement with critical theory and an ambition to uncover relations of power (Fairclough 1995). In contrast to Foucault's and Laclau and Mouffe's contributions to post-structural discourse analysis, CDA holds open the possibility that there exists a position outside of the prevailing discourse from which repressive discourses can be detected. Fairclough (1995) distinguishes between discourse and materiality, and describes the discursive as a sphere containing texts and other semiotic expressions, and the production and consumption of discourses. The social context, on the other hand, cannot be analysed in the

same way as texts, such that discourse analysis must be supplemented with social theory. CDA conceives of discourse as the semiotic elements of social practices, constituting a powerful force that shapes and influences the social and engaging in a dialectical relation with the field of social practices.

CDA's distinction between discourse and social processes differs from Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualization of discourse, which advocates an understanding of discourse and materiality as similar in the sense that both embody meaning. Social practices as well as discourse consist of signs; since our interaction with the world occurs via language, we 'read' both discourse and materiality (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). I find Laclau and Mouffe's position very convincing evaluated from the perspective of the philosophy of science. Practices become meaningful to us through the signs they communicate, and this makes discourse relevant for much more than texts. Still, in this dissertation I generally distinguish between discursive and social processes. Intuitively, it makes a difference whether something is *said* or *done*, and hence text and practice remain two categories in practice. Although it is clear to me that social practices are discursive in the sense that they communicate meaning, in this dissertation I write *as if* there is a distinction between discursive and social practices.

Although the absence of a theoretical distinction between discourse and materiality is convincing in an abstract analysis, it is more problematic when it comes to empirical research. One reason is that it makes it very hard to explain agency. The question of social agency does not occupy any central position within the work of either Foucault (1999) or in Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory. The most obvious explanation as to why agency is under-theorized in post-structuralist discourse

analysis is that it is “a type of analysis primarily addressed not to *facts* but to their *conditions of possibility*” (Laclau 1993:431, emphasis in original). Discourse theory holds that thought and action depend on the structuring of meaning, that discursive structures are unstable and open to change, but it does not strive to explain *how* social actors can instigate such processes of change. Since this dissertation is an empirical study, it became important to question the extent to which the different post-structuralist approaches to discourse open the way for a conceptualization of social agency understood as something other than a realization of discursive structures. This depends on how the various approaches to post-structuralist discourse analysis understand social subjects, and how they explain social change.

Foucault’s discourse analysis upholds the structuralist conception of the individual as subject to historical and social conditions. He sees the subject as decentred, and not as an autonomous and independent unity. This conception of individual agency was inspired by Althusser, who originated the idea that people are interpellated into subject positions in such a way that pre-existing social structures are reproduced (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999). Interpellation describes individuals’ process of becoming who they are through entering various categories or subject positions such as ‘mother’, ‘son’, ‘student’ or ‘professor’. The concept of interpellation was part of a theory arguing that capitalist ideology was the ruling force of society. The ideological state apparatus mediated capitalist ideology to the people, and through the process of interpellation, people were made to believe that the system was right (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999). Althusser’s concept of interpellation and his view upon social subjects

must be interpreted as part of an explanation of how power relations are upheld, rather than how they can be resisted and changed.

A weakness in Althusser's theory is the idea that a message will be understood as its sender meant it to be understood. This idea contributes to minimizing the importance of social agency. Hall criticized this conception in his seminal essay "Encoding/decoding", where he argues that there is no necessary symmetry between the production and the reception of a message (Hall 2001). People are able to decode messages according to codes other than the one intended by the sender, which allows for the possibility of a discursive agency based on interpretation and the co-existence of different and opposing codes or discourses.

Laclau and Mouffe have incorporated the notion of counter discourses into their discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). They argue that no discourse can ever be completely closed, and that there is always a potential for new articulations that challenge the existing notions of a discursive field. In acknowledging the possibility of creating opposing and alternative discourses, discourse theory suggests that subjects are capable of instigating social change. The problem is that Laclau and Mouffe do not present any explanation of how it is possible for subjects to break with existing subject positions and create new positions that enable different social practices.

Due to its distinction between discursive and social practices, critical discourse analysis, on the other hand, goes further towards explaining agency. According to CDA, subjects are active agents who are able to form independent discourses and who can resist relations of domination (1999, Fairclough 1992, Fairclough 1995). There are two main sources of social agency within CDA: the first is social practices such as political



mobilization and resistance against relations of domination. Within the CDA framework, these practices are better analyzed using social theories than as objects of discourse analysis.

The second source of agency is interdiscursivity. When language users introduce elements from one order of discourse into another, ways of conceptualizing the world are transferred. For instance, the introduction of market economic discourse into discourses on education and the health system have contributed to fundamental changes in the social practices of these institutions. Scholars now discuss how their university courses can become more marketable, and doctors discuss cost-efficiency of various treatments. Metaphors from the stock market even appear when people talk about their love relationships. A sentence such as “I’ve invested so much in this relationship” indicates that there is an expected surplus to be gained or lost. Interdiscursivity creates hybridity, and this opens for social change (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). A similar approach to discourse and agency can be found in Bakhtin’s analyses of the polyphony of literature and his dialectical theory of language (Tønnesson 2001). Polyphony is an expression of the inclusion of different voices in a text, and to construct texts that are polyphonic expressions can serve as a strategy for opposing and challenging a hegemonic discourse. Bakhtin’s work exemplifies how discourse is both constituted by and constitutes language structures: discourse is shaped by language structures, but simultaneously works them, transforms them and reproduces them (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999).

The main topic under discussion in the present study is how a new discursive practice can bring about social change. In the analysis which follows the discursive strategies employed by Chinese journalists are

interpreted as an expression of the journalist's agency. I write about discursive and social practices as if they are distinguished in the same way as in critical discourse analysis. However, at a higher level of abstraction both social and discursive practices become meaningful through their communication of signs, which means that I also subscribe to Laclau and Mouffe's view of the relation between discourse and materiality.

### **FIELDWORK AND ANALYSIS**

To do fieldwork is to engage with both meaning and materiality. Bourdieu's theory of social fields presents a notion of the field as consisting of networks of relations between social positions. These networks are structured, but can be changed and reshaped by social actors. Bourdieu argues that thinking in terms of fields means approaching the social world in a relational manner (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1993). Bourdieu's concept of the field corresponds to Chouliaraki and Fairclough's idea of orders of discourse that is a "socially structured articulation of discursive practices which constitute the discursive facet of the social order of a social field, such as politics, media or education" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999:114). In my fieldwork I have conceived of Chinese media as both a social field and a discursive order. Critical media discourse is a counter-discourse within this field, as it challenges the hegemonic understanding of what the media discourse should deal with. The journalists, editors and news media that produce the critical discourse constitute a sub-field within the Chinese media as a whole. Fields and discursive orders are ontologically contestable, but as Chouliaraki and Fairclough argue, they are heuristic concepts and can be modified in response to the particular analytic process at hand (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999).

I approached the field of critical journalism in China through interviews and by studying critical media discourse. In the section below I discuss the research process which has led to the analysis presented in this dissertation. This process from research design through fieldwork, analysis and writing has not been an example of linear and smooth progress and I subscribe to Alasuutari's view when he says that "it is difficult to relate to textbook descriptions of the research process; somehow they seem to be far removed from my own experiences" (Alasuutari 1995:158). Alasuutari is a rare voice when he claims that many research projects have histories of failures and problems that are seldom expressed in the final texts. I argue that what I experienced as problems during my fieldwork in China actually contributed substantially to my learning process (Sæther 2006) and I describe how I developed an insight into the field of critical journalism in China through this non-linear process.

The fieldwork was conducted from July to December 2002, the same autumn as the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress was convened. Beginning in the mid 1990s, the development within the Chinese media field has been characterized by more critical and problem-oriented journalism, but during the autumn of 2002 the working environment was more constrained due to the Party congress.

I had chosen to settle in Shanghai during my fieldwork so that my husband could attend the University of Oslo's exchange program for students in Chinese at Shanghai's Fudan University. Many interviews, however, were conducted in other cities, mainly because I discovered that there was less critical and investigative journalism going on in the Shanghaiese media than in other major Chinese cities. The difficulties in identifying critical journalists in Shanghai was one reason why I experi-

enced the first part of the fieldwork process as a failure, since my expectations of how it ought to be were not met. According to my research design, I should have been conducting interviews mainly with newspaper journalists, but when I arrived in Shanghai, the people I had trusted to help me to gain access to critical newspaper journalists were not immediately available, for various reasons. After a few weeks, I became rather desperate and started making a list of everyone I knew in China who might know someone within the field of critical journalism. I abandoned the idea of only interviewing newspaper journalists and decided to include others such as academics and activists who had a connection to the field. This was a more productive approach, and from then on my selection of interviewees followed the snowballing method; through several “snowballs” I ended up interviewing some of the people who had been crucial for the development of more critical journalism in China. Altogether, I did twenty interviews, divided between academics (4), activists (2) and journalists (14). The academics were relevant interviewees because their research dealt with developments within the media field, and the activists I interviewed both worked through media to raise consciousness of issues such as domestic violence and workers’ rights. The journalists were situated in different news organizations in Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong and Guangzhou, and the interviews focused on their own experiences as investigative journalists and editors. There was a concentration of journalists with previous or present connections to the paper *Southern Weekend (Nanfang Zhoumo)*. This paper has been at the centre of the development of critical and investigative journalism in China. It is not representative for the media field in general, but it is revealing for the practice of critical journalism that was the core focus of

this fieldwork. Even though the process of selecting interviewees was more messy than I had expected, the final selection corresponds to what Thagaard (2003) calls a strategic selection, where the information provided by the interviewees corresponds to the field of interest indicated in the research question.

The heterogeneity of this group served as a resource for the research process because it stimulated my awareness of the range of different subject positions within the Chinese media field. Even the one interview that offered least information about critical journalism taught me something about the conditionality of critical press in China. This was a journalist based in Guangzhou, and when I met him it turned out that he did nothing that could be characterized as critical and investigative journalism. He worked as an editor of international news, and within this field, the regulation was very strict. He listed the taboos involved in the coverage of international news, and explained how his job was restricted to conveying officially endorsed information. In the group of interviewees, there is a division between those who have provided me with background knowledge and insight in the history and mechanisms of the media field, and those who have more hands-on experience with conducting investigative and critical journalism. The latter group occupies the foreground in the analysis, but it is important to emphasise that I would not have been able to understand and represent their narratives without the background information.

Of the journalists I contacted, all except one responded to my e-mails or phone-calls. The one who never replied had previously lost his job after being interviewed by a foreign journalist, and one of the other informants thought it most likely that he did not want to speak to any for-

eigner about his work. I had worried a lot about whether or not critical journalists would think of being interviewed about their work as a risk, but this was the only occasion where it became a decisive factor. However, risk was an aspect when my door-opener to the journalists based in Guangzhou asked me to come after the 16<sup>th</sup> party congress had convened in Beijing in November, because the increased media control in the previous months had made the atmosphere tense. It became evident that among the journalists I interviewed, the degree of pressure they were subject to in their work varied substantially. This was reflected in the way they responded to questions. For instance, I asked some of the interviewees why several people had simultaneously left the paper *Southern Weekend* in 2002. The interviewees subject to the most pressure were very hesitant in answering this, while others explained it as a political protest. A new leadership for the paper had been appointed and the journalists regarded them as representatives of the propaganda authorities. The various subject positions represented by the interviewees clarified the boundaries of critical journalism as a field, and this was also a precondition for understanding the boundaries of critical media discourse.

During the fieldwork, I had four different approaches for becoming familiar with the discourses within the field of critical journalism in China. First, I asked the interviewees to send me articles as examples of their work. In one case I had read articles I found interesting and contacted the journalist afterwards. The second approach was to read articles in Chinese or in translation through various websites. The third was to buy newspapers and using the library to browse through articles that dealt with social problems. The fourth approach consisted in asking my research assistants to search for articles about particular topics, such as

mining accidents, environmental problems or AIDS. I used topics as metonyms, as signs signifying a general approach. AIDS, mining accidents and corruption are topics more likely to appear within critical discourse than elsewhere within Chinese media. When I searched for texts, I was looking for the framing of problems, how they were situated in relation to state and society, which actors were represented as responsible and how causal explanations were outlined. The articles I selected for the discourse analysis in chapter 6 all come from *Southern Weekend*. As mentioned, this paper has been at the forefront of critical journalism in China, and the texts analyzed here have typical characteristics of Chinese critical and investigative journalism. I presented my analysis of these texts at a workshop where a journalist in the *Southern* group was present. She spontaneously responded: “that is what we call the *Southern* style”. This comment indicated to me that I was on the right track in understanding how social problems are framed and presented in Chinese critical journalism, which is an objective of my analysis.

### *Embedding interpretation: contextual analysis*

The interviews and newspaper articles I studied during the fieldwork convey two different kinds of representations. During interviews, the informants convey spoken representations of their own practices and perspectives within the field, while the newspaper articles are written representations of various social problems in Chinese society. The previous discussion about representation expressed that the meaning of signs depends on the social code. With this in mind, it is evident that representations have to be read contextually, and fieldwork is a way to become familiar with foreign codes. Social codes separate insiders from outsiders,

and in the fieldwork tradition, participant observation has been important for gaining access to different social codes (Fangen 2004). Participant observation is not a method that I have employed in this work, but for this dissertation, my everyday activities in China were significant for the learning process that offered insight into the social codes operating in relation to Chinese media (Sæther 2006).

Codes can be mastered at many levels, and in my work, Chinese language was the most challenging, semantic code system that I needed access to. It was obvious to me that the better my language skills were, the more I would understand of what was going on in the field. Before embarking on this project I had spent one and a half years studying Chinese: one year at Peking University during my master's degree, and one semester at Fudan University in Shanghai during my PhD. Not surprisingly, high scores on beginners' exams did not correspond to functional language skills as an interviewer, nor for analyzing complex newspaper articles. For me, cooperating with other people has been a coping strategy and a key factor partly compensating for my insufficient language skills. I worked together with two students, one of them a friend I knew from my first stay in Shanghai in 1999, the other the cousin of a sociology graduate I had met at a workshop. When I was preparing the interviews, I would consult with them on how to best formulate my questions, and on some occasions, one of them also took part in the interview. She assisted me when I struggled with the formulation of follow-up questions or did not grasp a particular point in the interviewees' narrative. The most important contribution was that we could discuss the interview afterwards. The interviews that were conducted in Chinese were transcribed by the research assistant. This way I could read the text and sort out the things I



missed during the interview, in addition to the advantages of having transcriptions to hand when analysing the interviews.

The assistants also played an important role in the process of studying Chinese critical media discourse. We read newspaper articles together, discussed their content and related issues. These discussions have contributed to contextualizing my understanding of the texts and the interviews. My assistants' understandings and opinions about issues such as death penalty, school fees, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the religious Falungong movement, and their explanations of common arguments, helped me to identify different discourses present in television and print media. The work I did together with the two assistants was significant for helping me to contextualize my findings and make the social codes become more transparent.

To contextualize is part of the validation process that goes on during fieldwork, and in my work the interview situation became an important arena for testing whether or not my interpretations made sense to people within the field. I would present my understanding of arguments people had made in previous interviews or in articles, and ask the person I was talking to for comments. The responses were indicative of the status of my insight, from a relaxed response telling me that this is something everybody ought to know, to careful acknowledgement when I had captured the background behind a certain incident. Kvale (1997) includes this as a kind of communicative validation and Fangen (2004) concludes that the feedback from interviewees and informants is significant, but that it cannot be decisive. The researcher's interpretations will sometimes be contrary to the conceptions of the interviewees. In my work there was one argument in particular with which none of the journalists I interviewed

agreed. That was the assertion that media's relative freedom to criticize authorities at the local level, while remaining silent about the higher levels of the state, meant that journalists also acted as a kind of government watchdogs. This was clearly not in line with the journalists' self-conception, but it was recognized by the academics I interviewed. I continue to think that a consequence of the conditional autonomy of critical press in China could be that journalists also served as government watchdogs; however, this is not necessarily an intended consequence, and the journalists do not see themselves as such. As Fangen (2004) argues, validation by informants themselves cannot necessarily be taken at face value, but their validation gives important clues as to how problems and ideas are conceived within the field.

Presenting arguments and knowledge about the field in the interview situation was also an aspect of constructing myself as partly an insider and partly an outsider in the field. The interview was a dialogue where difference and sameness played equally important roles (Sæther 2006). Difference was my reason for asking for the interviewees' time. Many interviewees started by introducing me to the development in the Chinese media field in general before going on to discuss their own experiences. Sameness is crucial for communication because it is related to understanding. In the interviews, sameness could be constructed in several ways, such as shared attitudes. For instance, I made it clear that I acknowledged the constraints journalists were working under, while also recognizing that important things were being done despite the limitations in place. Humour and daily life observations were other ways of connecting and creating a feeling of sameness in the dialogue. Sameness and difference were also connected to my role as a foreign guest meeting

with interviewees. I think my guest status was the reason why I was often asked out for lunch or dinner after the interview. This was an opportunity to continue the conversation, and for the interviewee to ask questions about the Norwegian media and my own work. For me, the problem with these continued conversations was that I was quite exhausted from two hours of intense listening and talking in Chinese and not able to make as much out of it as I otherwise could have done.

As I became more familiar with the social codes in the field of critical journalism, my own subject position as a researcher changed. I began as a complete outsider, defined in relation to China scholars and to people in the field. At the outset of the project I perceived my position as inscribed with inferiority. My Chinese skills were inadequate, my contact persons in the field were few, I was not brave enough or persistent enough, in short, I perceived myself to be lacking in most of the necessary requirements for conducting successful fieldwork. This rather tragic emotional state made me seriously fear that I would end up without the information I depended on to write a dissertation. During the first, critical period of the fieldwork, this fear gradually eased. The process of interviewing people, reading newspapers and working with my assistants brought me closer to an understanding of how things worked within the field of critical journalism. This also changed my self-perception in the field of myself as someone who was lacking in every important aspect, to that of a person with knowledge about the practices of critical journalism in China.

The combination of conducting interviews and discourse analysis has provided me with a rich collection of materials for analysing the conditional autonomy of the critical press in China. I have employed different analytic strategies in the interpretation of the interviews and the newspa-

per articles. In relation to the texts I have used a discursive approach focusing on *how* reality is construed and constructed, while the interviews are analysed with an emphasis on *what* journalists are dealing with and *why* they act as they do. Hence, I have treated interviews and newspaper articles as two different kinds of texts. The interviews involve several authors: the interviewee through his or her narrative, my own voice through questions and verbal and non-verbal responses, and the transcription conducted by a research assistant or myself, as the written representation of a taped conversation. The distinction I have made between interviews and newspaper articles does not mean that interview-texts are biased and contaminated by the researcher, while the other texts can be analysed in an objective and neutral way. Different kinds of texts offer insights into different processes: in this study the interviews are revealing for what they say about the practices of critical journalists, while the newspaper articles illustrate the formation of critical media discourse.

The people I have interviewed for this dissertation were promised anonymity. Most of them were not concerned about this, as long as I was not a journalist myself and would employ their information only for the purposes of research. Critical journalists in China face a situation where their work can result in sanctions ranging from limited disciplinary acts such as self-criticisms to prison sentences. I have tried to ensure that no-one is caused any additional difficulties as a result of their willingness to share information and insights with me. Therefore, the names of the interviewees in the next chapters are all fictitious, mostly constructed by combining family names and given names from the reference lists of various articles on my desk. I apply two strategies in order to avoid providing too much information about particular individuals. In one case, I

have given one informant two different names; I fear that otherwise the sum of this persons' interests and achievements would make it possible to trace him. The other strategy is not referring to particular interviews in places where I otherwise would have, because this would attach too much information to a single name. The need for ambiguity also explains why I do not always clarify whether an interviewee is a journalist or an editor.

### *Summing up*

The aim of this chapter has been to investigate the methodological implications of conducting a study which combines an interest in the practices of Chinese critical journalists with an analysis of critical media discourse. Towards the final stage of the research process it became clear to me that the biggest challenge was not to combine an interest in meaning and materiality, but rather how to do this while recognizing the importance of people's agency. I have argued that discourse analysis in general has paid little attention to the role of agency, and that it is critical discourse analysis (CDA) that has the most to offer when it comes to incorporating an understanding of agency. In this study, the emphasis is on the structuring of critical journalists' working environment, the conditions of possibility that regulate their work and the discursive agency of critical journalists in China. A consequence of my theoretical and methodological choices made during the analytical process is that I have less to say about the bodily and concrete practices through which journalists work to modify and change repressive structures. Through this critical evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the methodological framework, I wish to

make my work open to its readers and to contribute to further development of the theories that have inspired this work.

However, the outcome of an empirical research process does not depend on the choice of theoretical and methodological approaches alone. In the second half of the chapter, I have discussed the fieldwork and described how the knowledge production was a multifaceted process in which my understanding of the field developed through dialogue with other people. I argue that contextual knowledge of Chinese society is a precondition for understanding the political role of critical journalism. The combination of fieldwork and discourse analysis provides two different angles from which the changes taking place within Chinese media may be analysed. The interviews conducted with critical journalists reveal their conscious strategies for reporting on problematic issues in Chinese society, while the discourse analysis demonstrates how different voices are built into the texts to make them less provocative and to normalize critique. Taken together, this material illustrates how political change occurs within the context of an authoritarian state.

## Chapter four

# **State-society relations in China**

The institutional context within which Chinese media operates is very different from the institutional structure which faces the mass media in liberal democracies. China is a one-party system without privately owned media, and Chinese journalists are subject to severe restrictions in their work. The aim of this chapter is to outline the institutional background for the processes of change that are taking place within the Chinese media. One decisive legacy from Maoist China is the absence of a clear division between state and society. The institutional structure of the Chinese media was moulded in an era when journalists were propaganda workers, and the various practices of Chinese journalism today are still embedded in an institutional structure geared towards propaganda. The organization of political power, the geographical power structure, and the organization of propaganda work represent the conditions Chinese journalists face in their daily work. While this institutional set-up has proved resilient in the current of social and economic changes which has occurred in China during the last decades, its practices are changing. In this chapter, the emphasis is on the structures as they were established in the Mao period, while the following chapters discuss how new institu-

tional practices within the media are influencing the relations between state and society. State and society in China are not the clearly bounded entities reflected in the academic literature on state-society relations. This makes 'civil society' a problematic concept in the Chinese context (Keane 2001). In the Chinese party-state under Mao, society was integrated into the state organization, and this heritage continues to affect the practices of the Chinese media today.

### **ORGANIZATION OF POLITICAL POWER**

The main characteristic of China's political system is the dominance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). There are nine other nominal parties, but these are not to be regarded as opposition parties. They are aligned with the CCP through a united front, so in reality the state is a one-party system (Mackerras 2001). The Chinese political system includes a complex and far-reaching bureaucracy, but the polity has not developed institutional procedures that ensure democratic accountability. No stable means of political participation have developed, and at the top level of the party, the actions of the leadership are primarily restricted by the presence of the other members of the top group, and not by laws and regulations (Lieberthal 1995). However, this does not mean that Chinese politics should be conceptualized as a centralized dictatorship emanating from Beijing. The Chinese political system is increasingly decentralized; throughout the process of economic reform, the local state has gradually gained in importance (Montinola, Qian and Weingast 1995).

The present Chinese political system was established after the 1949 revolution. The inspiration came from different sources, among them the institutions the CCP built during its war against the Nationalists before



1949. Traditional Chinese governance was also important to Mao Zedong, but equally so was the socialist system in the Soviet Union. Today, the formal structure of the state is very similar to the one that was established after the revolution, even though the subsequent periods of upheaval and chaos have left their mark (Lieberthal 1995). Now, as in the Mao era this formal structure should serve only as a starting point for understanding the allocation of substantial power in China. Since 1949, the Chinese political system has been characterised by a mismatch between the formal, institutional power structure and the substantial, real decision-making power. In the Western Weberian bureaucratic procedure, policy is formulated as rules and laws which prevent bureaucrats from bending implementation according to their own whims and will. In contrast, political communication in China is characterized by documents that are often vague and open to interpretation (Keane 2001). This means that Chinese decision-making processes must be traced through networks of personal power, connections and flexible institutions. During the last two decades, however, the political development in China has moved towards a more accountable system, where formal power more closely corresponds to substantial power. One sign of this is the acknowledgement of disagreement and conflicting interest in bodies such as the national party congress (NPC), which used to function more as an ornamental institution than a political organ (O'Brien 1994).

There are two columns carrying the Chinese political system: the party organisation and the government system. They are known to overlap, and one of the objectives of political reform in China since 1979 has been the creation of a clearer separation between party and government.

## PARTY AND GOVERNMENT

At the top of the formal CCP party structure is the *National Party Congress*. The party congress convenes infrequently; since 1970 it has met eight times, with the most recent session being the 17<sup>th</sup> party congress in October 2007. The party congress appoints the top party leadership and representatives to the *Central Committee*. This is formally the highest authority within the CCP in the periods between party congresses, and it meets once or twice a year. The Central Commission of Discipline Inspection is part of the central committee and constitutes a surveillance channel that gives people an opportunity to report misdeeds and injustice. Within the Chinese polity, the Central Commission of Discipline Inspection, the People's Congress, the judicial system and the media all constitute possible surveillance channels (interview, Feng Junjiu). Many official positions, such as that of party head in important cities like Shanghai, automatically bring with them membership of the central committee. Formally it is the party congress which appoints members to the central committee, but in reality the Politburo has the power to make these decisions (Lieberthal 1995).

The members of the *Politburo* constitute the top power elite in China, and the number varies between 14-24 members.<sup>3</sup> Normally several of these members serve in full-time positions in places other than Beijing; they might be province leaders or occupy other important positions, and hence will not attend all meetings. The 5-9 core members of the Politburo constitute the *Standing Committee of the Politburo*, which is headed by the general secretary of the CCP. The general secretary is also the formal

<sup>3</sup> <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/17th+Party+Congress>

head of the *Secretariat* that provides staff support for the Politburo and the Central Committee. Several specialized departments are positioned under the Central Committee. In theory the importance of the body is reflected in its size, while in reality it is the other way around. The smaller units are the most powerful, which means that the Standing Committee of the Politburo is the most important unit within the party system.

The government equivalent of the National Party Congress is the *National People's Congress* (NPC) that performs the role of the legislature within the Chinese political system. Under Mao, the NPC was only a rubber-stamp legislature at best, but during the post-1979 reform period it has gradually strengthened its position. It now takes a more active role in drafting major policies, but it is still far from an independent legislature (Lieberthal 1995). The *State Council* is the other major government body. It is led by the premier, and in theory its members are elected by the NPC. The State Council is the cabinet of the Chinese political system, and a number of commissions and ministries are subordinate to the State Council. The ministries and commissions are at the top of the vertical hierarchies reaching from the central state to the local territorial levels of administration (Lieberthal 1995).

#### GEOGRAPHICAL LEVELS OF THE PARTY-STATE

Chinese citizens' interaction with the state can take place on many levels. A typical newspaper article begins by listing the geographical scales: "In Jiangxi province, Wanzai county, Taibu city, Fangzun village there was an explosion in a school" (Xinhua net, undated). The major state and party bureaucracy is found on five levels: central, province, county, city

and the local unit. The relations between these levels are open to negotiation and the division of power is not constitutionally fixed (Lieberthal 1995). The *province* level is equal to the rank of ministry in the central government. At this level, most units are called provinces, but there are also five so-called autonomous regions (Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang, Ningxia and Guangxi) and four cities that have this rank (Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing). The autonomous regions have large minority populations which give them a different status. The provinces are large entities and are crucial in administering China's huge population. The party and government institutions at the central level are largely mirrored at the provincial level, which plays an important role in the implementation of all major projects initiated by the central state (Lieberthal 1995). Regional economic inequality has increased in the wake of the economic reforms which began in the late 1970s, and the difference between rich and poor provinces is now regarded as a major problem in China. Provincial leaders have a substantial degree of autonomy, and although they have to implement decisions made at the central level, there is great leeway for less specific policymaking at this level.

The *county* level is the next rank in the national political administrative hierarchy. Government and party institutions are also fully represented at this level, and they deal with their counterpart bodies at the province level. County-level departments are responsible for implementing and adjusting national policies, and during the economic reform period they have also been given more freedom to pursue local economic development. *Cities* (the municipal level) differ from counties and provinces because they assume a variety of different ranks in the political administrative hierarchy. Metropolises such as Beijing and Shanghai have the same

rank as provinces. Many cities have the rank of county or higher, and hence are placed directly below the province level. These cities have the same party and government organs which the province and county level have.

The local level in China has been organized in different ways during the post-1949 period. The urban population has been organized into neighbourhoods headed by a residents' committee, and into work units (*danwei*). Peasants were organized into communes until these were abolished at the outset of the economic reforms. Today the lowest level of government is the township (*xiang* or *zhen*). They have an average population of 18,000 and there are several offices below this level, such as an economic affairs office, an office of industry and commerce, a tax office, an office for civil affairs, for education and health, etc (Edin 2000).

All Chinese media have linkages to party or government institutions at one of the aforementioned levels. The decentralized nature of Chinese decision-making and implementations means that the institutional practice varies from place to place, so Chinese media do not face a unified, monolithic state, but a multifaceted structure of different scales and institutional actors.

In consequence, the functioning of the party and government system is a lot more complex than its organizational chart would seem to indicate. The relations within the system are governed by two principles of management: horizontal and vertical relations. These relations permeate the pillars of government and party rule. *Vertical* linkages imply that each government agency at the local level is under dual leadership. For example an office of industry and commerce will be subordinate to the county level department of industry and commerce, but also to the township

government. These two controlling bodies have the same bureaucratic rank (Edin 2000). The *horizontal* linkages emanate from the territorial principle in the Chinese demarcation of administrative tasks. In contrast to the Soviet system, which organized administrative tasks across geographical borders, the Chinese bureaucracy gives local authorities control over various economic sectors within their geographic region. Local government agencies are under the professional leadership of their vertical superior institution, but also simultaneously under the political leadership of their local government, which again is subordinated to the next level in the vertical party hierarchy (Edin 2000).

The overlap between party and government institutions is a key characteristic of the Chinese party-state. There are supra-bureaucracies, also called leading groups (*xitong*), that integrate party and state organizations and thus create relations between the two hierarchies (Brady 2008, Lieberthal 1995). These are groupings of bureaucracies that deal with the same area of responsibility. Important *xitong* include Party Affairs, Government Work, State Security and Foreign Affairs. The Propaganda and Education *xitong* is a sub-group under Party Affairs (Lieberthal 1995). Each of the *xitong* include executive agencies from the top to the bottom of the system, creating vertical relations within major spheres of domestic governance (Lieberthal 1995). The *xitong* networks stretch from the workplace, through the local, provincial and central levels of the state. The borders between the *xitong* are porous, and the battles between top leaders have been reflected in the changing scope of authority of the various *xitong*. Organizations can shift from one *xitong* to another and each leader has tried to extend the scope of his and his allies' *xitong*. During the cultural revolution, the Propaganda/Education and the Military

*xitong* expanded as a consequence of Mao's campaign to weaken his adversaries who headed the Party Affairs and other *xitong* (Lieberthal 1995). The flexibility of an adaptable institutional structure such as the *xitong* represents a strength for the party leadership, but it does not favour accountability and transparency.

### **THE INTERVENTIONIST STATE**

After the revolution in 1949 the Chinese party-state made redistribution of material wealth, services and opportunities its central ambition. The CCP's social and political discourse was disseminated and embedded through the construction of a new redistributive apparatus. This process provides an illustrative example of the close link between discourse and material practices. The state's formulation and interpretation of needs among the population, and its definition of criteria for allocating resources, opened a new space for techniques of discipline and normalization (Yang 1989). Factories assigned housing according to marital status, and singled out particular individuals as model workers; together with workers whose spouses served in the armed forces, the needs of these workers were prioritised over those of other workers (Yang 2002). This preferential treatment in turn encouraged other people to marry when they became old enough (the party decided when men and woman were ready to marry), and it stimulated people to behave like model workers, and to respect and admire the army. Unmarried women were often unable to obtain housing and had to remain in dormitories at the work unit. This was a negative sanction for deviating from the life stages the party-state established as normal.

Up until 1979 almost all urban jobs were allocated by the state, and there was no labour market. The work unit (*danwei*) was the lowest level of the state in urban areas and included functions from production to welfare, reproduction and surveillance (Yang 1989). If an employee wanted to apply for a loan, the decision was up to the *danwei*. People had to apply to be allowed to marry, and decisions about pregnancy and childbirth were also not left to individuals. Family disputes were resolved through the *danwei*, and if a couple decided to have a divorce, they needed a permit. The *danwei*'s decision would depend on whether the divorce rate in the population was rising or falling, and the state's concern over the negative impact of divorces on society. In addition to such external factors, the decision was based on an evaluation of the individual applicant's performance as a worker, and the applicant's ideological and political profile would also be taken into consideration. The political, practical and personal information about the involved couple was available in an individual personal dossier held for every individual in the work unit. This information would not be available to the employee, and if a person was transferred from one *danwei* to another, the file followed (Yang 1989).

Perhaps the most striking example of the interventionist state is the one-child policy. This policy was implemented after 1979, during the same period as the beginning of the economic reforms. It demonstrates how post-Mao China continues to consider individuals' freedom to make their own decisions to be subordinate to the government's judgement. The one-child policy has allowed state representatives such as doctors, nurses, planned-birth committees, labour unions and the women's fed-



erations to monitor women's bodies, menstrual cycles, sexual conduct, and relationships with husbands, parents and in-laws.

The close regulation and disciplinary practices of the Chinese state can be seen as part of a high modernist state project in which every aspect of human activity has been a possible object of the benefits of scientific and technical progress (Scott 1998). The Chinese state has conducted its high modernist project through a wide range of strategies. Allocation of material resources provided has brought the state very close to the personal lives of individuals, but the state's discursive strategies have also seen as a powerful means for constructing the new China. In this context media policy has been another tool in the state's modernization project, aimed at raising the morals and qualifications of the population.

#### THE ORGANIZATION OF PROPAGANDA WORK

In China, propaganda constitutes a mediating sphere between state and society. It is an area of 'thought work' (*sixiang gongzuo*), where the state communicates to the people what the correct ideological positions are. Cheek (1989) emphasises that researchers need to understand what propaganda means to different groups, as it carries different meanings to the top leaders who guide it, the journalists who produce it and the media audiences who consume it. Foreign researchers who approach this field in China meet with an understanding of propaganda that differs from the entirely negative connotations the term has in English. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as "information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view". Propaganda carries connotations such as brain-washing, suppression and indoctrination. In contrast, to understand the Chinese meaning of propa-

ganda, we have to swap the words “biased” and “misleading” with “correct” and “guiding”. Propaganda communicates ratified political discourse, through which the audience can learn what the party-state deems legitimate public issues to be. Propaganda further introduces the legitimate vocabulary of the political discourse. Cheek (1989) cites a Chinese media survey conveying truthfulness and credibility as keys to good propaganda. Here, truthfulness and credibility presumably refer to the politically true and politically credible; whether or not the propaganda corresponds to an external truth criterion would seem to be less important.

This understanding of propaganda reflects a particular view of the state. Within the Confucian tradition the relationship between ruler and ruled is seen as analogous to the relationship between father and son. As a result of his heavenly mandate and superior moral character, the benevolent ruler is qualified to judge what is good for his subjects (Lee 1990). A Confucian belief holds that people receive their good nature from heaven, and the education that completes it from the king (Nathan 1985). The communists intended to overthrow the Confucian hierarchy, but many of the social norms associated with Confucianism, such as children’s responsibility for their parents (filial piety) were also continued under Communist rule (Tang 2005). The Confucian educational perspective on the relationship between ruler and subject was compatible with the Marxist notion of the party as the vanguard of the proletariat. Paternalistic politics that emphasise group interests rather than individual rights have roots in both Marxist ideology and Confucian values. The educational perspective on the relationship between the state and its subjects was sustained in the CCP’s propaganda work. In contrast to the lib-

eral idea of the media as society's watchdog in relation to the state, the Chinese media's propaganda work was based on the assumption that the natural condition of state-society relations was one of harmony and common interest. The public was imagined as unitary entity, and the public interest was therefore understood to lie in the upholding of morality and obligation rather than individual rights (Keane 2001). The ultimate purpose of propaganda was to change people's minds, to influence their way of thinking and acting; the message about the advantages of communism was communicated through carefully guided education, campaigns, theatre, literature and sports.

In their ambition to engineer a new culture for China in the years after 1949, the leaders of the CCP viewed ideology as one of the key tools for transforming Chinese society. In this context, creating a system for disseminating information to the whole country was essential (Chang 1997). The CCP's leaders drew inspiration from the Soviet Union and its propaganda system, as well as from their own experiences in maintaining a communication network during decades of persecution and then civil war. The party designed the propaganda system to include literature, art, music, education, publishing, scientific research, public health, sports, museums and more (Nathan 1985). Formally, the propaganda system was placed under the supervision of the State Council, the top government body (as discussed above) (Lieberthal 1995).

In practice, the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP has always been in charge of the ideology and propaganda system. Thus, decision-making power over propaganda lies in reality with the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CCP. The main party newspaper, *The People's Daily*, along with other important

media and cultural institutions, are controlled by the party secretariat, which belongs to the Politburo (Cheek 1989). The Propaganda *xitong* has organized the day-to-day propaganda work in China since 1949. At its head is a group consisting of approximately six members: a Politburo member, a leading secretary at the central level, and representatives of the leading propaganda organs, such as the Propaganda Department and *People's Daily*. In response to new challenges posed by the economic reforms, a new leading group was established in 1997 in order to exercise power over broadcasting and journalism for the higher purpose of maintaining the Chinese socialist spiritual civilization. Members include propaganda officials, members of the politburo, the director of the central television channel (CCTV) and two vice-ministers (Keane 2001).

The main task of the Propaganda *xitong* has been to shape the values and perspectives of the population (Cheek 1989). Within this conception of state-society relations, the value of information depends on its purpose, as the public's access to information is not seen as being of value in itself. Because of this, the Chinese propaganda system has distributed information on a need-to-know basis. Beginning in 1949, the Chinese media was divided into two channels, one open channel to communicate to the public, and one internal channel directed at party cadres. The internal publications included both domestic and foreign news, as well as scientific journals, works in translation and restricted-circulation films. The open media consisted of radio and newspapers and magazines that were distributed through the postal system and subscribed to by work units. The post office had catalogues of the different publications where some could normally not be subscribed to outside of special areas, and others could only be bought if the person had a certificate or letter from

their work unit, explaining the need. Most publications, such as local periodicals, specialized journals and in-house media organs were not mentioned in the catalogue, so unless a person belonged to the targeted audience, (s)he would not know of its existence (Nathan 1985). A well equipped work unit's reading room could offer a broad variety of newspapers and magazines, including all provincial papers, because the workers came from all over the country. Ordinary work units probably had less variety, but a subscription to the *People's Daily* was a minimum. In the countryside, rural communes and production brigades normally subscribed to one or more publications. Because of this system, the number of readers was several times higher than the actual number of subscriptions. Individual subscriptions were not common (Nathan 1985).

The propaganda system not only controlled access to information, it was also heavily involved in the mediation and perception of propaganda. Party-state authorities organized urban citizens into political study groups. Most groups were organized by their respective work unit(s), but retired workers joined groups in their residence unit (Lieberthal 1995). The study groups met for an hour, one to six times a week. The study material was mainly newspapers. A typical session focused on an article that was read aloud and then discussed in small groups (Nathan 1985). The study group system, and the reading rooms in the units, provided an infrastructure for the propaganda that ensured that the views of the CCP reached the whole population. Today, a substantial percentage of subscriptions to the *People's Daily* still come from state institutions (He 2004). Propaganda was an integrated part of a system for mass mobilization that incorporated society into the party organization itself. Walder's (1986) seminal analysis of work and authority in Chinese

industry describes how rewards such as bonuses and promotion were linked to the individual's performance in the study groups. Activists who took a leading part in organizing meetings, writing posters and performing self-criticism were more likely to move upwards in the system. The close integration between party-state and society meant that propaganda was consumed in closely monitored circumstances. People's reactions, their abilities to interpret and reproduce propaganda in an approved manner were linked to economic and material benefits.

Nathan (1985) divides the recipients of Chinese propaganda into three groups based on their attitudes towards information: the acceptors, the sceptics and the decipherers. The *acceptors* often belonged to work units with poor media facilities. They received the news in an indifferent manner, not believing that it had to be true, but their doubt did not lead them to question the information in itself. They simply believed that the news was the information the Party wanted them to have, and getting by in the study sessions was enough for them. The *sceptics*, on the other hand, distrusted the news and took a critical position towards the propaganda. They cared more about identifying the truth, and as they felt alienated from the official media, they did not believe that the truth could be extracted from it. They viewed the news as an element in a political strategy, for instance that the news had been selected to show that communism was good. Some emphasised the distance between their own experiences and the propaganda they received. When the newspapers reported on another great harvest, it simply did not match the experience of worsening living conditions. Others uncovered the reality behind the system of model units when they experienced that their unit became a celebrated model unit, not because of its unique achievements, but be-

cause of support from higher central officials. When the propaganda materials insisted on a certain opinion, it made the sceptics critical because they assumed there was a hidden agenda covering up the spectre of alternative opinions. The third group of media receivers doubted the truth-value of propaganda, and then went further, actively searching for alternative explanations. The *decipherers* normally had access to more varied media resources. They attempted to decode the official propaganda, and in so doing they consulted other available sources such as foreign radio, internal media and rumours. Voice of America, BBC, Radio Moscow and other foreign radio stations were available in China on short wave radio, and they provided news about China as well as foreign news. Rumours and jokes helped to fill in the holes in the official narratives. Stories about the political leadership were interpreted into traditional folk culture, such as the story-telling tradition and the Chinese operas. In addition the decipherers used interpretative techniques quite similar to those of the Western Pekingologist, such as looking for missing standard phrases, and looking for changes in photographs. Other revealing signs could be details in the reports, for example when the media mentioned premier Zhou Enlai's 16-hour working day, this worked as a denial of rumours that he was sick. Nathan (1985) found that the decipherers did not necessarily oppose the strictly controlled media situation. They sometimes accepted what they saw as the state's need to control information, while continuing to look for the stories behind the propaganda.

The propaganda work was most intense during the mass political campaigns and one of Nathan's (1985) interviewees explains that he studied the news most intensely when a political movement was gearing up. In interviews with Chinese emigrants Nathan asked a question that was

meant to indicate a possible connection between the habit of reading newspapers and a sense of social responsibility. The question was: *Some people say that even if a person is not very interested in politics, he or she still has an obligation to pay attention or get involved. What do you think?* (Nathan 1985:170). The Chinese interviewees interpreted this question in a surprising way and their answers showed that *not* staying informed was associated with danger. It was dangerous because you could say something wrong, so staying informed was not a way of involving yourself in politics, but a way of keeping out of politics.

Today, there are no longer compulsory study groups in the workplace, and the marketization of the Chinese media has caused profound changes in media production, distribution and consumption (de Burgh 2003b, Lee 1994, Lee 2000, Tang 2005, Zhao 1998). Newspapers are partly financed by advertisements, they are sold at newsstands and read in private homes. However, the dominating institutions of the propaganda infrastructure still remain, and information continues to be distributed on a need-to-know basis. The changes that are occurring in the Chinese media, and in the relations between state and society, are developing in relation to the existing propaganda system. Importantly, this means that these changes must be negotiated in relation to a hegemonic discourse which states that information should serve the state's interests, since only the state is able to take the greater good of the population into consideration (Keane 2001). The propaganda discourse is still built on the notion that information needs to be controlled to protect the stability and well-being of the country.



## **THE CHANGING POLITICAL ROLES OF THE CHINESE MEDIA**

Analyses of state-society relations have often been conducted in oppositional terms, where a strong state presupposes a weak society and vice versa. Popular Western representations of state-society relations in China tend to portray the Chinese state as omnipotent, as a totalitarian state versus a powerless society. This discourse peaked during the Cold War, when individual freedom was seen as non-existent in China. During the 1980s, new approaches to Chinese politics began to emphasise the potential of civil society. The civil society debate conveys a normative separation between state and society, and the existence of civil society within authoritarian states is conceptualized as a sign indicating the transition to democracy is underway (Keane 2001). In the debate on the emergence of a civil society, the notion of China as totalitarian was challenged, but due to its normative limitations, this literature did not manage to capture complexity of Chinese state-society relations (Gries and Rosen 2004). The applied concepts were exported from Western liberal democratic contexts and from the eastern European transition experiences, where the cultural activities of civil organizations were crucial for the popular mobilization against authoritarian regimes (Keane 2001). A general problem of analyses of the relations between state and society is a tendency to conceptualize the state as monolithic, and this is particularly so in authoritarian contexts. A more productive approach to state-society relations can be achieved through an analysis of how people in different contexts meet quite different versions of the state (Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava and Véron 2005). The Chinese state has many faces, and in the years since Mao's death in 1976 state-society relations have undergone a transformation. The most fundamental change is probably the decrease in the state's

presence in people's everyday lives, but institutional reforms have also had a profound influence on state-society relations.

Since 1976, there has also been a fundamental reorientation within Chinese politics. Representations of this reform process often start out with the observed changes within the economy, and focus on the paradox that China has managed to reform its economy without changing its political system. The inherent assumption is that economic liberalization is to be followed by political liberalization. Lagerkvist (2006) also identifies this tendency in scholarly work on China. Within the media field, it is reflected in the argument that the Chinese media is in a transitional stage, on its way to a more independent status. Contrary to this expectation Lagerkvist (2006) finds that increased control and increased freedom seem to go hand in hand in the regulation of the internet in China. In other words, the Chinese context does not live up to the expectations of the civil society perspective, but does this imply that there has been no substantial political development during the period of economic reform which began in the late 1970s?

The tendency to underrate changes within the Chinese political sphere may be due to Western observers' application of an overly narrow definition of political reform. Montinola et al. (1995) argue that China has gone quite far in a process of political decentralization, and characterize the result as a Chinese-style federalism. This process has provided the economic infrastructure that has been necessary to move away from the planned economy, and to sustain high economic growth since the beginning of the 1980s. The decentralization process has transferred political power from the central state to the local levels of the state. Parallel to this process, there has also been an ideological shift towards a pragmatic

market-oriented discourse, and the economy has opened up towards the international markets. All in all, this makes it difficult for the central state to reverse the process of political decentralization. While offering a valuable contribution which establishes that political changes in China are indeed for real, Montinola et al.'s solution of labelling these changes as being 'Chinese-style' can be problematic. Explanations of social phenomena that emphasise 'Chinese characteristics' do not really delve into the power relations and processes that characterize these phenomena, but only label them as different from their Western counterparts (Keane 2001). As in every case, political processes in China have to be approached as contextual; for this purpose, a more nuanced vocabulary is needed.

The reform process initiated under Deng Xiaoping has changed the relations between state and society in China. In the 1980s, the legitimacy of the state was no longer sufficiently anchored, as Maoist ideology was challenged by the economic reforms. New sources of legitimacy had to be found. Some observers of Chinese politics have pointed to nationalism or patriotism as the replacement for Maoism (Bøckman 1997, Unger and Barmé 1996), while others have emphasised the Chinese state's ability to 'deliver' economic growth as the major source of state legitimacy versus society. However, since decentralization has allocated power away from the central authorities and the responsibility for the economy is more dispersed, Shue (2004) argues that the central state cannot claim direct credit for economic growth. Instead, Shue suggests that continued social stability serves as the main source of state legitimacy in China today. Stability is perceived as a key factor in the maintenance of the conditions

necessary to provide economic growth and development, and to provide this stability is the pre-eminent role of the state.

When the basis of the state's legitimacy changes, it influences the relations between state and society, creating a new opportunity structure for existing state institutions. For instance, O'Brien (1994) shows how deputies to the Chinese People's Congresses have increasingly taken on new roles compared to their previous practices. They used to be restricted to communicating the main state policies to their local constituencies, but over the course of the reform period they have begun to act as advocates for local interests and have become more susceptible to local views. O'Brien's work shows how the established institutional set-up may assume new roles and contribute to changes in the existing power relations. This is the broad context within which the three following chapters are placed. They address changes in Chinese media practices that involve a new institutional role for Chinese journalists which transcends the limits of the previous propaganda role.

### *Summing up*

This chapter has provided an outline of main aspects of China's institutional structure and the position of the propaganda apparatus within it. The Chinese party-state was originally constructed as an interventionist state that encompasses most aspects of society. During the period of economic reform, there has been a roll-back of the state, but the absence of clear boundaries between state and society remains a characteristic of the party-state. The propaganda system illustrates how the party-state regulates society through institutions on every geographical level. Propaganda does not have the same negative connotations in Chinese usage as

in English, and party-state authorities conceive of propaganda as means of guiding and educating the population. Since readers actively interpret perceived messages, this intention is not always mirrored in people's perception of propaganda. During the last three decades, state-society relations in China have undergone profound changes, first and foremost in the economic sphere, but also politically. In the next chapter, these processes of reform will be addressed through an examination of changes within the media field.

Chapter 5:

## **Diversifying media practices: the changing political roles of Chinese journalists**

In established democracies, the media constitutes a sphere which links state and society. Media discourses shape audiences' perceptions of a broad range of topics, ranging from mundane, everyday problems to election campaigns and governments' performance (Curran 2005). An independent media is conceptualized as a precondition for a functioning democracy, because it serves as a check on government, ensures openness, and channels information between different parts of society (O'Neil 1998). A consequence of the emphasis on independence is that ownership becomes the main indicator of the media's potential as a democratizing force in the state-society relation. It follows from this that the political role of media in authoritarian states is understood as depending upon its autonomy. This chapter seeks to nuance this understanding of the media's role within an authoritarian one-party state. As argued in chapter 2, the media's discursive and social practices are important in evaluating the media's political role in society. In China, state ownership has not prevented the media's role from changing during the process of economic reforms underway since the beginning of the 1980s. The objective

of this chapter is to delve into the question of the media's practices and their political implications within the Chinese context. In order to do so it addresses the following question: *What are the political roles of the Chinese media?* The Chinese media has not abandoned the political role assigned to it during the Mao era (1949-1976). Instead, it has accumulated additional roles during the post-Mao economic reform process. The result is a situation marked by tensions and paradoxical practices. The Chinese mass media simultaneously acts as a mouthpiece of the party-state, a market economic media business and a critical, investigative social actor. Each of these practices has political implications. This approach opens the way for answers that are more ambiguous, essential for capturing the complexities which characterize the media's role in authoritarian states.

The first part of the chapter analyses the foundation for the media's role that was established in the Mao era, and how the transition to a more market-oriented economy changed media practices. The second part deals with the emergence of a more critical, investigative journalism within the Chinese media field. The central questions discussed in this part of the chapter are how critical journalists establish themselves as a natural part of Chinese media, whether critical journalists take a role as independent watchdogs, or if they rather continue to serve the government, albeit in new ways. Finally, the new discursive practices of critical journalists are analysed to show how they both relate to the established, hegemonic role of Chinese media and yet strive to change it.

### **FROM MOUTHPIECE TO MARKET: THE INSTRUMENTAL ROLE OF THE MEDIA**

The Chinese media has undergone profound changes during the period of economic reform, but its institutional structure retains many of the

characteristics from the political role assigned to the media in the Mao era. During the formation of the People's Republic of China, the media was moulded into the party-state structure (Chang 1997, Cheek 1989, Lynch 1999, Nathan 1985) as part of the CCP's propaganda system. The main task assigned to the media by the CCP was to propagandize party policies and assist in the rectification of the party (Cheek 1989). In order to succeed in its revolutionary project, the party needed to understand the views of the people, and it depended on the media to help it obtain this oversight (Liebman 2005). This meant that media served a particular function within the party, as well as mediating between the CCP and the people.

The 1950s were the first time in the history of China that every individual could be reached through the media network. The media was a bridge between the new state and its citizens, and it had a central position in conducting 'thought work' (*sixiang gongzuo*) (Liebman 2005, Nathan 1985). Controlling information flows and structuring the symbolic environment were the central components of thought work (Lynch 1999). For this purpose, propaganda was necessary. As mentioned in chapter 4, CCP discourse defined propaganda in positive terms, as politically correct information. The party took responsibility for protecting people against wrong and misleading information, and for providing people with the necessary political skills through educational journalism (Cheek 1989). Within this paternalistic discourse, newspapers were construed as essential in the process of constructing the nation. This made an instrumentalist conception of the political role of the media predominant. In a speech to the editorial staff of a party paper in 1948, Mao stated that the "role and power of newspapers consists in their ability to bring the party



program, the party line, the party's general and specific policies, its tasks and methods of work before the masses in the quickest and most extensive way" (Nathan 1985:154).

As in most countries, Chinese media policy was framed in a discourse about the public interest (Keane 2001). The Maoist idea of the public was connected to an image of society as a totality in which all relationships were changeable. Within this totality, culture was a means to be utilized in the education of the public, and public interest was "recognized as the maintenance of collective morality and obligation rather than an individual's constitutional rights" (Keane 2001:789). In principle, the Chinese media was not intended to be an oppressive, top-down propaganda channel. Maoist ideology considered the party to be the representative of the people's government, so the party's mouthpiece could simultaneously be the mouthpiece of the people (Lee 1990). This harmony-oriented conceptualization of the state-society relation assumes that the members of the proletariat have a common interest, and that the party is the articulation of the interest of the people. In this context the media's role is to ensure this unity between the party and the people.

The instrumental notion of the media's role meant that media content was evaluated according to its potential function in the construction of a new society. The problem was that the central tasks outlined by Mao could easily contradict one another. The first task, communicating party policies, was conducted through the distribution of propaganda, but the second task assigned the media a role in the rectification of the party. This established the media as one of several supervisory channels that could receive complaints and grievances from the people (Liebman 2005): the media should serve the people, not only through propaganda, but also by

keeping them informed and exposing abuses of power. This resulted in a two-faced role where in addition to the media's propaganda function the media was conceived as an arena for criticism and self-criticism throughout the party. The critical function was considered to be necessary in order to avoid bureaucratism and to secure democracy (Nathan 1985). The CCP encouraged reporters to write what they saw, because the party was relying on this information. The media's investigations could serve as a check on tendencies among lower level officials to overrate positive results and underestimate local problems (Liebman 2005).

In theory, journalists were expected to combine their role as propagandists with critical, investigative reporting. Service to political authorities and service to the public were conceived as two sides of the same coin, something that could be recited in the same breath (Polunbaum 1990). In practice, the two aspects of media's role were not equally valued, and the critical, investigative practice was strictly restrained. CCP leadership decided that critical reports should only be published if they were of immediate benefit to the party's interests (Nathan 1985). General secretary Liu Shaoqi stated that "to report everything is objectivism" and hence opposed to Marxism (Nathan 1985:155). Rather than contributing to the rectification of the party, reports exposing flaws and malpractice were considered potentially harmful, and held back from the public. Instead, the CCP wanted a focus on positive news and educational content that would contribute to their overall political project. The party established a guideline stating that the amount of critical, or negative, news should not exceed 20% of the media content (Lee 1990). News was not evaluated according to its perceived importance, but according to its potential effect. The mouthpiece conception of the media's role and the dis-

inction between positive and negative news are legacies that still shape the working conditions of Chinese media (Interview, Xu Feng).

The solution to the inherent conflict between the propagandist role and the investigative role was to establish two different channels to separate them. In addition to the open media directed at the public, there was an internal media channel through which negative reports were published. For journalists, the parallel media channels involved two main assignments: producing propaganda, and doing investigative work such as revealing the masses' reactions to party policies and reporting on local mismanagement and corruption (Hsiao and Cheek 1995). The dual system was a solution with roots stretching back to the period in which CCP was fighting a civil war against the Nationalist Government. In 1931, the communists established the Red China News Agency, which was later changed to Xinhua (New China) News Agency. The agency established a twofold practice, under which it transmitted CCP news to the outside world, and used army radio to collect information from outside. These became known as Reference News (*Cankao xiaoxi*), and were distributed to party leaders (Zhao 1998).

Under Mao, the internal channel made it possible to utilize journalists' role as providers of information, without risking tarnishing the image of the party in the population. The internal media provided the authorities with reliable information about the situation of the masses, their attitudes and problems, as well as constituting a channel for political feedback depicting the results of CCP policies (Hsiao and Cheek 1995). Hood (1994) states that notwithstanding the belief that totalitarian regimes are indifferent to public opinion, Chinese leaders have been particularly sensitive to grievances and complaints among the population, due to the lack

of a stable institutional outlet for their frustrations. Journalists' accounts were deemed as being more reliable than intra-party reports and investigations conducted by the party leadership. The internal channel also offered a possibility for receiving news from abroad that was judged to be incongruous with party-state interests. For instance, the disintegration of the Soviet Union was a topic that was carefully covered in the internal channel, while the general public received little information (Hood 1994).

In Chinese the term for internal news is *neibu cankao*, often only called by its abbreviation *neican*. In English this is translated as 'internal reference material'. The term 'reference' indicates that the material has not been subjected to ideological control, which means that nobody has to take personal responsibility for presenting the news (Nathan 1985). In the Soviet media, there was a parallel practice where newspaper articles consisted of two parts. The first part contained the ideologically approved representation followed by the word *odnako* (however) that signalled the introduction of new content that had not yet been adjusted in relation to the ideologically correct news representation (Neumann 2001). In China, internal reports are graded according to their content and distributed on a need-to-know basis (Hood 1994). The most classified reports are produced by Xinhua and are only circulated among the top leadership (Liebman 2005). In today's China, the internal channel continues to be important and internal reference news are published by all the top media. In general, journalists are said to spend around 30% of their time on internal reports (de Burgh 2003b). The maintenance of the two-channel system means that information continues to be distributed according to an individual's place in the party-state hierarchy, contributing to an information gap between the general public and its leadership.

Despite the two-channel structure that separated propaganda from investigative and critical reports, the tension between the media's role as a top-down propaganda channel and its role as a channel for public supervision has remained latent in Chinese politics. Since Mao's death in 1976, there have been several periods where the mouthpiece function has been challenged by more extensive critical reports being published within the open media for a time. This tension was evident in the early 1980s when the main party mouthpiece, the People's Daily, published new and ground-breaking investigative journalism. Deng Xiaoping had appointed Hu Jiwei, a respected party member, as editor in chief for the People's Daily in 1978. Hu firmly believed that an editorial policy that excluded the voice of the people was mistaken (Jernow 1999). His ambition was to create a newspaper that presented diverse views, including the negative aspects of the Chinese society. Therefore in 1980, eight months after the oil rig in the Bohai Bay had sunk, killing 72 people, Hu decided to publish a report (de Burgh 2003b). Up until that time, accidents in general were only reported in the internal media. The People's Daily also exposed the real situation behind some of the state propaganda, such as model people's communes that turned out to be less ideal than the propaganda representations had depicted (Jernow 1999). Such reports suggested a new kind of political accountability, where the party-state was openly confronted with its weaknesses. The paper's exposure of the Bohai accident led to the resignation of the minister of petroleum, and pointed towards the political power of critical journalism (de Burgh 2003b).

The 1980s was characterized by power struggles within the CCP leadership and conflicts between reformers pushing for more openness and

conservatives resisting it (Hamrin 1994). When the conservative faction gained power, Hu Jiwei's views came to be considered as dissident and threatening and he was forced to resign during the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign in 1983. During his time as editor, the People's Daily had increased its circulation to a height of 7 million, proving that the change of editorial policy was popular (Liu 1990). After Hu Jiwei was removed from this position, he continued to be a central voice in the debate about media's role in China.

A new upsurge in investigative reporting came in the late 1980s. At the forefront was the World Economic Herald which became known for articles written by critical intellectuals on politics and the economic development. The paper was innovative, using interviews – which was a relatively new genre in Chinese media in the 1980s (Li and White 1991) – and it expanded the scope of the issues that were being debated in the open media. The World Economic Herald had close connections with the reformist faction within the CCP leadership, and was supported by General Secretary Zhao Ziyang. The paper's editor in chief, Qin Benli, was an experienced journalist who knew how to argue with propaganda officials; this ability, combined with Zhao Ziyang's political backing, ensured the paper a relatively free position (Zhao 1998). It has been debated how it was possible that such a critical paper was allowed to continue its publication. For several years, a group of leading Chinese intellectuals were allowed to speak their mind within the public sphere. The most likely interpretation as to why this was allowed draws on a notion of the Chinese state as non-monolithic: the reformist faction of the CCP leadership found the World Economic Herald useful in propounding the reformists' views of the policy decisions to be made for China's future (Zhao 1998).

This means that the World Economic Herald was not tolerated due to the reformist faction's wish for press freedom, but because the paper was continuing to fulfil the instrumental role the CCP ascribed to Chinese media, albeit for novel ends. This points to a more general pattern within the CCP leadership: although there have been people in high positions within the CCP who favour more press freedom, the reformist leaders have shared the traditional Maoist notion of the media's mouthpiece role (Lee 1990). Besides, the criticism forwarded by Chinese intellectuals in this paper was balanced by their technocratic approach to economics and politics. This meant that the World Economic Herald never challenged the right of the elite to rule, and this position kept them in line with the views of the reformist faction of the CCP (Li and White 1991).

Nonetheless the World Economic Herald was shut down in 1989. In the aftermath of the crackdown on the democracy movement on 4 June, 1989, the media was object to severe criticism and rectification from the CCP leadership. Journalists had taken part in the demonstrations under a banner stating "Don't believe us - we tell lies" (Hood 1994:41), and General Secretary Jiang Zemin considered the media to be an important explanatory factor behind the "turmoil and rebellion" (Hood 1994:39). To the CCP leadership, the demonstrations proved that something had gone wrong with the media and its propaganda work, and the authorities needed to re-establish control.

The mouthpiece role reflects the Chinese media's position as an institution that is built into the party-state. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the media's predominant assignment has been to contribute to the 'thought work' of the nation, by spreading politically correct information. In addition to their role as propaganda producers,

journalists have also been required to provide the party-state with information about the real conditions of the country. This double assignment has caused an inherent tension in the media's political role, which the CCP has sought to resolve by through directing propaganda and more investigative news through separate channels. In spite of all the limitations on the media's practices inherent in the mouthpiece conception of the media, the notion that journalists have a responsibility to report to the political leadership about social problems and abuse of power is significant for explaining the position critical journalism has acquired among Chinese media workers in recent years.

#### ECONOMIC REFORM AND MARKET JOURNALISM

The Chinese media's integration into the party-state structure has been changed as a result of the economic reform process. Subsidies have been reduced, and market incentives now partly fill the space previously occupied by propaganda purposes (Huang 2001, Lee 1994, Lee, He and Huang 2006, Zhao 1998). When asked about their work, the journalists interviewed position their experiences within an over-arching narrative of transition:

Before, our media was top-down, but during the few years there has been a great change that has taken place following the opening and reform of the country. The transformation has been the Chinese media's movement towards a market economy (...) the development of newspapers depends on catering to the readers' demands, as the market economy does not request the flattering of anything, instead it wants to achieve the identification between newspapers and its readers.

(Interview, Fan Yihong)



In almost every interview, this story was told as the explanatory background for the new content and practices within the Chinese media. This narrative of the media's reform is structured around the meaning of 'now' as opposed to the meaning of 'the past'. The past/present distinction aligns media reforms with modernity, openness and the market economy, while the past is represented as backwards, without any 'real' journalism. In Fan Yihong's narrative, the great changes within Chinese media are construed as a process of adaptation. The media has not changed its practices as a consequence of a new media policy, but because they needed to adjust to the introduction of a market economy following the opening and reform of China (*gaige kaifang*) which began after Mao's death. The changes in the media's practices in the direction of increased sensitivity towards the audience's interests have implications for the political role of the media. In Fan Yihong's understanding, this redefinition of what the purpose of media ought to be does not reflect a new assignment by the party-state authorities, but is the result of media adapting to new economic circumstances.

Xu Feng, another experienced journalist, explains what he sees as the improvement of the media in China in recent years. He emphasises changes in ideas about the media's role, changes in the financing of the media and new information technology as important factors. In his version of the narrative of transition, he compares the transition to a more economic independent position for the media to a child's gradually increasing independence. The reduction in state subsidies is likened to weaning, and the requirement that media organizations earn their own money is compared to finding one's own food to eat. The parent/child metaphor conveys an image of closeness, which makes media's increased

financial independence analogous to the self-reliance of a child over whom the parents retain the final decision-making power. The parent/child metaphor is also applied to other aspects of the development of Chinese media, such as the relation between mother-papers and their offspring. When the organic nearness of the parent/child relation is transferred to the media/state relationship, it positions the power of the state over the media as natural.

When the journalists interviewed choose to frame their own experiences within the greater narrative of the Chinese media's transition from a planned economy to a market-oriented one, it is because these processes of change have been both extensive and fundamental. China's economic reform process has been characterized by a partial "roll-back" of the state and its replacement by the market. This caused a cut-back in state subsidies during the 1980s; media organizations were expected to generate their own income and in return were allowed to retain their own profits (Ma 2000). The reduction in state subsidies were unevenly conducted: the central party-press organs were protected, while media positioned on lower levels of the party-state were forced to cover their own expenses. However, the transition is not as clear-cut as it is often represented as being. Subsidies in the form of preferential taxation, land grants, free housing and occasional economic transfers have continued, and so does the practice of state office subscriptions (Lee et al. 2006). Until the 1980s, newspapers were distributed through work units, and newspapers did not depend on circulation numbers at all. After the transition to the market, the central party papers, such as the People's Daily and the provincial party papers, have continued to depend on subsidies and state office subscriptions (Lee et al. 2006). Other media have had to

search for new means of continuing publication after the source of state funding was cut off. This situation has contributed to a differentiation of Chinese media.

In the market economy, individual subscriptions and circulation numbers became crucial for attracting advertisements, and this required saleability. Before the reforms began, newspapers for public consumption were four sheets of black and white print repeating well-known propaganda phrases. But as Fan Yihong emphasises, the flattering of government officials did not appeal to the new audience of individual media consumers, and the media was forced to begin to take into consideration what might make media products marketable. When journalists tell the story of changing media practices as part of a greater narrative of transition, it is also due to the enormous social changes which have been taking place during the same period. A more affluent middle class began to emerge, resulting in a growing demand for new media services (Zhao 1998). The rise of a new labour market changed the media's recruitment practices. In 1994, the internet was introduced in China, and the media has changed as it has adapted to this overall process of transition.

The media's new dependency on readers and advertisers had a profound influence on the form and content of newspapers and other media. Appealing layout and colours fronted the print publications, and to achieve what Fan Yihong (Interview) called the identification of readers, newspapers and other media included topics they perceived as being relevant to their audience's lives. On the radio, call-in-shows dealing with everyday life problems became common. In newspapers, columns discussing questions such as "how to raise your child" signalled a new sensitivity towards readers' interests. This also made the media more sus-

ceptible to people's grievances as well as making it appear as less of a top-down information channel. Entertainment journalism was another new feature, and news about movie stars and famous people became widespread (Huang 2001, Lee 1994, Li 1998, Zhao 1998). The necessity of appealing to readers also affected the evaluation of news. Under the mouthpiece role of the media, the timeliness of news was of less importance, since news too was evaluated according to its instrumental value in raising the moral and political level of the people. After the creation of a media market, news became one of the decisive factors in determining the outcome of the competition between media outlets. Old news did not sell papers, nor did long propaganda texts. The media adapted: journalists started to write shorter pieces, and employed presentation techniques from the international media.

The commercialization of the Chinese media led to an enormous expansion in the number of media outlets, from less than two hundred newspapers in the late 1970s to more than two thousand in 1997. In addition came the increase in TV and radio stations (Li 1998). This expansion was conducted through a diversification of the Chinese media, where new media outlets catered to specific segments of the audience, rather than to the people in general. The main party newspapers such as the People's Daily and the provincial party papers continued to rely on state subsidies and remained party mouthpieces. However, they lost out to the privately funded newspapers in the competition for advertising funding, so to compensate for their inability to raise income, they established so-called offspring papers. This enabled the party papers to retain the mouthpiece function, while the offspring papers could cater to readers' interests, and offer softer and more marketable content. In the process the

media became “more attuned to business pressure *and* political demands” (Lee et al. 2006:584, italics in original). This was the first step towards the media conglomerates that dominate the Chinese media market today. Within the print media, conglomerates have been constructed around major party newspapers. The party-state’s aim in fostering the process of media conglomeration has been to bolster the national media in relation to foreign competition, and to retain control in the expanding media market.

It is obvious that the transition from planned to market economy within the Chinese media sector was not a complete shift. While journalists in the new media outlets focus less on politics and more on entertainment and consumer-related information, they have not become politically independent. Market-based publications have had to take political interests into consideration, and the party-state’s mouthpiece organs have developed more profitable media products. This complex situation has led to a wide array of media practices, of which many are hybrid forms incorporating presumably contradictory elements. One example of this is the common practice of paid journalism within Chinese media. During the 1980s, it became commonplace for journalists to receive money for participating in press conferences and for publishing stories that reflected the interests of commercial actors (Zhao 1998). Advertisers often bought editorial space and presented their products in a manner that simulated the editorial content of the publication. When the distinction between *advertisements* and *editorial* content is removed, the result is *advertorials* (Erjavec 2004). Advertorials are attractive to advertisers because they believe that the editorial format lends more authority to the message conveyed than simple advertisements. The increased reliance on

the market rather than the party-state enabled the media to cater to the audience's interests in a new way, but the phenomenon of paid journalism points to a continuation of the role of journalists as advocates for interests of those other than their audience. The mouthpiece role of the media presupposes political advocacy journalism, while under the more market-oriented economy, paid journalism made journalists advocates of commercial products and interests. The political mouthpiece role made media unable to be watchdogs over the political authorities, and paid journalism impeded their ability to be critical of business interests (Zhao 1998).

### **CRITICAL JOURNALISM**

The introduction of market incentives in the Chinese media challenged the mouthpiece role, because propaganda journalism was unable to compete for the attention of buyers and advertisers. The creation of a media market led to more diversified media content, and entertainment and consumer information became central areas of interest. Among Chinese journalists, some considered entertainment to be the media's most important task (de Burgh 2003b). The media's emphasis on entertainment and lifestyle information stimulated consumption by the emerging middle class, and supported the party-state's economic policies. To be able to compete within this new media environment, the party mouthpieces established offspring publications that could be bought by individuals, not only subscribed to by work units. For instance, in Shenzhen, the mouthpiece organ of the special economic zone launched publications such as *Hot Travel* and *Autonews* (Lee et al. 2006). However, within the new media market, readers did not only yearn for entertainment, but also for

fresh news that was believable, and that represented reality in a different way than propaganda journalism did. This has been the basis of success for the Guangzhou-based newspaper Southern Weekend (Nanfang Zhoumo).

*Southern Weekend* is part of a media conglomerate structured around the Guangdong Province Party Committee's mouthpiece, the *Southern Daily* (*Nanfang Ribao*). The weekend paper was established in 1984, to cater to the taste of readers and to strengthen the party paper's financial situation (Sun 2001). During the first ten years of its existence, *Southern Weekend* remained a local paper with limited circulation outside Guangdong province. Beginning in 1994 its circulation increased and it became a paper with national distribution and very high circulation. It became popular among educated middle class readers, mainly because *Southern Weekend* provided its readers with a new kind of investigative journalism that challenged the limits of Chinese media discourse. Investigative journalism (*diaocha xinwen*) is defined by its problem-oriented nature and is connected to media's scrutinizing ability (*jiandu nengli*) (de Burgh 2003a, Zhao 1998). This was possible because the Guangdong province authorities accepted *Southern Weekend's* journalistic style. Guangdong's provincial Propaganda Department has been less strict than many others, and its leader from 1993 to 2000, Yu Youjun, became famous for easing restrictions on local media (South China Morning Post 17.03.06). Guangdong was among the first provinces to embark on the process of economic reform, and the province authorities' tolerance had been primed by the access to Hong Kong radio and TV for the Cantonese-speaking population in the province (Latham 2000). This had exposed both journalists and local government to a freer media.

After 1994, *Southern Weekend* became known for bringing new topics into public discourse and it gained its status as a 'courageous' newspaper. Its institutional culture made it stand out, and the paper employed editors and journalists who saw themselves as critical and investigative, and who wanted to break loose from the confines of propaganda journalism. They adopted a watchdog conception of their own role as journalists, and this critical approach to authorities, official truth and propaganda interests brought the paper a great deal of grief. Its critical editors were subsequently replaced by former propaganda department employees, and after 2002, *Southern Weekend* no longer constituted the vanguard of the critical press in China (Interviews, Xu Feng, Ai Hongwen). Many of the journalists have moved on to new papers; some of them continue to work within the *Southern Group*, while others have taken up positions in national TV (CCTV) or other print organs. Nevertheless, the importance of *Southern Weekend's* work remains undeniable, in that it has contributed to a new role for Chinese media, and it has been central in the articulation of new media discourse. This makes the journalists and discursive practices of *Southern Weekend* of particular importance to this study of conditional autonomy of the critical press in China.

#### REDEFINING JOURNALISTS' ROLE

The introduction of more entertainment journalism made the Chinese media field more complex, but it did not call into question the right of the party-state authorities to define what people should or should not know about. This challenge, on the other hand, has come from more critically inclined journalists who decline to be propaganda workers. Within the hegemonic Chinese media discourse, the mouthpiece role of the media



has been undisputed; it has defined propaganda as the normal, commonplace kind of journalism. Hegemonic discourses appear as natural and self-evident (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), and when new discourses challenge a hegemonic discourse, they are easily depicted as irrelevant, as being contrary to the public good or simply as subversive. A resistance strategy within a field dominated by a hegemonic discourse is to establish the counter-discourse as natural too. Critical journalists in China have chosen to make use of existing discursive elements and rearticulate the media discourse, in order to construe their own practice as legitimate and as conducive to the public good.

When critical journalists have challenged the hegemonic understanding of the media as the mouthpiece of the party, they have done so by establishing their own practice as *professional*. They represent themselves as loyal to the fundamental task of media outlined in the hegemonic mouthpiece discourse and do not construe critical and investigative journalism as an oppositional practice. Critical journalists align themselves to the basic conception of the mouthpiece role, which is to contribute to the interest of society; what they challenge is the notion of *how* this should be done. By focusing on social problems, journalists activate the media's role as a channel for public supervision. This was an aspect of the media's assigned task within the mouthpiece role, but became subordinate to the media's propaganda mission. In their ambition to change Chinese journalism, critical journalists use aspects of the hegemonic discourse to represent their choices as legitimate. Simultaneously they make the mouthpiece role of the media appear to be illegitimate, because it is a top-down channel that excludes the voice of the people.

For the journalists who worked for *Southern Weekend*, the wish to serve the public rather than the government is a defining characteristic. This identity reverses the top-down character of mouthpiece journalism, and critical journalists describe their own practice as *real* journalism, in contrast to propaganda. Their emphasis on serving the people changes how they see the relationship between journalists and government, and this in turn influences the critical journalists' relation to the internal channel. Within the mouthpiece role of the media, investigative reports revealing social problems have always been communicated directly to the leadership through the internal channel (de Burgh 2003b, Hsiao and Cheek 1995). This excludes the general public, which the critical journalists see as their audience. Several of the journalists interviewed felt that writing stories that reach fewer readers, the better they are, is contrary to the whole idea of what journalism is about (Interview, Xu Feng, Zhao San-peng, Ai Hongwen). To these journalists, their relation to the public defines their profession, and they argue that their capacity to influence goes via the public's knowledge and reactions. The media's influence does not depend on a direct relationship between journalists and the state, but rather on the media's relation to its public audience.

The propaganda role of the media has meant that journalists in China have evaluated news according to how well it communicates politically correct messages on behalf of the party-state. This instrumental conception of news value is something critical journalists do not acknowledge. One interviewee explained that he looks upon journalism as a reflection. He thinks the journalist simply ought to describe what he sees for the public (Interview, Ai Hongwen). Another informant used a truck as a metaphor, saying that he looks upon himself as the truck that loads the

news and transports them to the public (Interview, Xu Feng). The idea conveyed by these two journalists is that the journalist is a neutral conductor between incidents and the audience. They see the journalist as objective rather than as an actor that actively shapes attitudes. Within the mouthpiece conception of the media, objectivity has been a politicized term regarded as synonymous with reporting everything. This was understood to be in opposition to Marxism, because it undermined the propaganda function of the media (Nathan 1985). In international media discourse, objectivity is a defining characteristic for the professional identity of journalists. However, being objective is generally described as impossible within the academic research literature (Curran 2005, de Burgh 2000c). Although academics view journalists as situated social actors reflecting the particularities of class, education, interests and dominating discourses, the notion of the journalist as a neutral and objective actor is a useful discursive means for critical journalists in China. It facilitates a representation of the professional identity of critical journalists as incompatible with the instrumental role the journalist is assigned within the mouthpiece role. It also distinguishes critical journalists from the practitioners of other forms of advocacy journalism, such as paid journalism. When journalists construe professionalism in a manner that excludes mouthpiece journalism, they state that journalists taking bribes, or working for mouthpiece organs such as the *People's Daily*, are not *real* journalists (Interview, Xu Feng). This makes critical journalism stand out as more legitimate, and the only form of journalism that meets professional standards.

When critical, investigative journalists express how being objective is fundamental to their work, it is not only articulated as an opposition to

propaganda, but also as the opposite of being subjective and biased (Interview, Shi Youli, Xu Feng). They represent subjectiveness as a common problem in Chinese media discourse. Chinese journalists often refer to anonymous sources, and not infrequently these represent the journalists' own views in disguise. This is an inheritance from propaganda journalism, for which the instrumental utility of the news story defines its importance. Objectivity is also seen as connected to working methods, since listening to and reporting from both sides of a conflict make articles less biased and more objective (Interview, Xu Feng). Within propaganda journalism, there is never any doubt about right and wrong, nor any call for interpretation, since the general aim is to provide the public with politically pre-approved information.

Ideas about objectivity and truth are central in Western media discourse (de Burgh 2003b). When critical journalists transfer these ideas to the Chinese context, they confront an authoritarian one-party state that forbids independent media. Journalists choose discursive strategies that give concepts such as objectivity, truth and public service a content that is compatible with the context within which the journalists work. For instance, Shi Youli says that as long as there are people willing to talk, critical journalists try to get as close as possible to the truth, but without violating rules and regulations. There is a discursive convergence with foreign conceptions of journalism among the critical journalists, but the discourse is modified and contextualized in order to fit into the existing framework.

Within the hegemonic Chinese media discourse, the main reason for information control is the need to protect social stability (Lagerkvist 2006, Shue 2004). In the same way that critical journalists co-opt the notion of

serving the public by making it a defining trait of their own identity, they also take the hegemonic argument about protecting social stability and use it to carve out their own identity. Critical journalists argue that social stability can be threatened by ignoring people's right to know. When accidents happen and information is withheld, rumours and panic are often the result (Interview Zhao Sanpeng, Xu Feng). This argument does not question the importance of social stability, only the means for achieving it. In a controlled political environment, it is not possible to openly challenge the hegemonic discourse on social stability. Stability is conceived of as a main source of legitimacy for the Chinese party-state; to avoid negative consequences, journalists must accept social stability as a premise.

While critical journalists do not challenge the idea that social stability must be protected, they emphasise violations of people's *right to know* as a key source of public unrest and dissatisfaction. Human rights discourse is controversial in China, and is often represented as a cover for the imperialist ambitions of the Western world (Sæther 2000). Using the phrase 'right to know' (*zhiqing quan*), rather than freedom of expression, signifies a distance from international human rights discourse. Strategically, it is important that people's right to know appears as a collective right, whereas freedom of expression can more easily be brushed aside as a liberal, individual right that must be subordinated to the need for social stability. The focus on people's right to know can also be understood as a market discourse where people's demand for information must be satisfied by the supply side, which is the media. The discourse of the market-oriented economy is less politically sensitive than the human rights discourse, and is better suited for convincing the authorities to ease their

control over media content. Nevertheless, arguing for people's right to know challenges the mouthpiece conception of media. For instance, critical journalists argue that the channelling of news through the internal channel is a violation of people's right to know, as is the continuing media censorship of important incidents and problems.

A central component of media censorship in China has been the division between negative and positive news. The media has been required to restrict the amount of 'negative' news to maximum 20%, with the remaining content to consist of 'positive' news. Critical journalists perceive the positive/negative dichotomy as a means for media control, but they oppose it on the grounds that it is useless for the purpose of evaluating news value (Interview, Ai Hongwen). According to Xu Feng:

The things that are newsworthy, and can be called news in China, are categorized as negative news (...) That a public security official or a tax office do their job in a good manner, that is only normal, regular, and that cannot count as news. Dereliction of duty, crimes, that is news.

(Interview, Xu Feng)

The insistence on judging the importance of news on an independent basis brings critical journalists in China more in line with Western conceptions of the media's role. Western journalists in general believe strongly in their own objectiveness and autonomy and look upon themselves as tellers of the truth (de Burgh 2003b). In China, the media is prevented from being independent from the party-state, but critical journalists still emphasise their awareness of independence from other influential actors. In general, the Chinese media is part of an economy where corruption is an extensive problem, and journalists are frequently offered bribes. These so-called 'red envelopes' (*hong bao*, named after the enve-

lopes used for wrapping money for children's New Year's gifts) can contain up to tens of thousands of yuan on some occasions (Interview, Ai Hongwen). To critical journalists, refusing bribes protects their independence. However, several journalists explained that on some occasions, refusing a bribe cannot be done without ruining the entire story, but in those cases the bribes should be handed over to the newspaper (Interview, Ai Hongwen, Xu Feng, Fan Yihong). These ideas about independence are adapted to the particular context critical journalists in China work within, but the refusal to accept bribes is still a signifying aspect of being a *real* journalist. For the newspaper *Southern Weekend*, the refusal to publish advertorials and to accept bribes has been a central aspect of establishing an identity as a newspaper that serves the public. A former editor was offered 300,000 yuan in advertisements in the early 1990s if the paper would withdraw a critical investigation about a tobacco factory. The editor refused, and this act was then turned into a proverb: "Never think about money, think about the paper" (Interview, Fan Yihong). This sentence acquired a symbolic value for the journalists working for the paper.

Critical journalists or newspapers such as *Southern Weekend* cannot claim to be autonomous. Their strategies to establish themselves as a natural part of Chinese media are characterized by partial opposition and partial loyalty to the mouthpiece role. Critical journalists relate to fundamental aspects of the mouthpiece conception of the media's role, such as 'serving the public', and 'protecting social stability', but modify these aspects through the formation of a new critical identity. Within this identity, people's right to know, objectivity and independence are central discursive moments, and measured against these milestones, mouthpiece

journalists fall short. Critical journalists diagnose mouthpiece workers with split professional identities as partly government officials and only partly journalists. This is associated with the old-fashioned, closed society that China used to be. Critical journalism, on the other hand, is modern, and more in line with ideas of journalism abroad (Interview, Wu Yunlu). To critical journalists, professionalism is incompatible with cooptation as government officials. A central question then becomes whether or not critical journalists are able to be the independent watchdogs they identify themselves as being.

#### GOVERNMENT MISSION OR INDEPENDENT WATCHDOGS?

Given the critical journalists' opposition to the hegemonic mouthpiece conception of the media's role, one may wonder what has made the Chinese party-state tolerate the development of critical journalism. As long as journalists stay within the rules that regulate their professional activities, are they really independent watchdogs? It is evident that critical journalists' emphasis on serving the public does not make them equal to dissidents. The Chinese party-state accepts 'public supervision' (*yulun jiandu*). This "means acting like a watchdog, keeping an eye upon society and drawing attention to what the authorities may have missed" (de Burgh 2000d, de Burgh 2003b:111). On the other hand, the party-state does not allow independent media; but within Chinese political discourse, public supervision does not necessarily imply impartiality. It can be conducted on behalf of the state, and it can enhance the legitimacy of the state, because it makes it appear to be more responsive to the grievances of the population. However, when critical journalists state that their loyalty lies with ordinary people (*laobaixing*) and not the state, they at-



tempt to create freedom of movement for a role that exceeds the limitations placed upon a government watchdog. The discussion below addresses this tension between critical journalism as a government-inspired mission and as an independent watchdog role by investigating the objectives of critical journalistic practices.

Zhang Ping is a senior journalist who has been engaged in investigative journalism since the 1980s. He has published several books, and has been particularly interested in rural China. When asked about his work and his motivation, he tells about a case he investigated that dealt with a woman in Shaanxi province who had her face destroyed by her husband. She had been forced to marry a man she disliked through an arranged marriage. Her husband was beating and mistreating her, and one day she ran away from home. He discovered where she was and forced her to return home. The next day the husband and two of his family members attacked her and poured acid over her head and body. She survived, her husband and his brother and sister-in-law were arrested, but they were released after only two days. It was the absence of a court case after an attempted murder that caught the journalist's interest, and he went to the village to investigate the story. The story was confirmed, and he found out that the husband's father had been a national model worker in the 1950s, and he was still very respected and held a position as municipal vice major. This background protected the members of his family to the extent that they could even get away with attempted murder.

To the journalist the story was interesting because it illustrated the more general problem of the absence of an independent judiciary. In this locality the judicial system was secondary to the political institutions, and this protected the criminals and resulted in injustice. Zhang Ping wanted

to show how this woman had been victimized in several ways. As a woman she was forced into a marriage where she was abused and her basic human rights violated. As a farmer she was poor and without the necessary connections to further her case. She had wanted to sue the husband, but had not been able to make anything happen. As a citizen in a country where the judicial system is subordinate to the political system, her offenders could get away without being punished.

This case of the disfigured woman falls within the category of critical journalism in China that is directed at exposing power abuse. Journalists assume a watchdog role when they publish such stories in the open press, but typically, cases such as the injured women in Shaanxi are limited to exposing singular instances of abuse of power at the local level of the state. In this case, investigative journalism caused a reaction and the culprits were punished. This can be interpreted as the journalist's government-inspired mission: he conducted public supervision on behalf of the central state, and addressed a concrete problem that was later rectified. However, as the journalist emphasises, there are many women like this victim. They are vulnerable as a result of systemic injustice, and almost powerless when the judiciary is corrupt and undermined by personal and political interests. The concrete, local case has a more systemic context dealing with social injustice and the failings of the judiciary system; investigating this challenges the party-state's legitimacy.

From the late 1990s, cases of corruption and criminal behaviour among officials have regularly been disclosed (Interview, Xu Feng, Wang Yi, Fan Yihong). The journalist Ai Hongwen has investigated many such cases and says that his goal is to help the victims of corruption and abuse of power as best he can. He focuses on the individual victims of abuse of

power, and tries to use his own knowledge of law to compensate for victims' lack of resources and fight back. He is motivated by his sense of justice and this inspires him to take risks and to 'ferret out' the hard-to-find evidence in corruption cases. His hope is that his reports may influence higher levels of government to investigate and prosecute the criminals involved. Ai Hongwen portrays himself as playing an active role in revealing how public officials abuse their positions. There is a discussion among Chinese journalists as to how far they should take this role. One of the informants from a more heavily controlled news organization stressed that media should *not* act as the police or be a judge, and that other institutions are responsible for bringing forward evidence of criminal behaviour. This journalist confines the media's role to reporting on cases after they are revealed (Interview, Feng Lihong). The difference of opinion between these two interviewees can be represented as one of degree rather than as a complete opposition. They both believe to some extent in the central party-state's ability to deal with crime and injustice. Neither of them explicitly criticizes the systemic level. However, the willingness actively to scrutinize abuses of power makes Ai Hongwen less likely to restrict his investigations to topics and circumstances approved by the party-state.

In critical journalists' accounts of their work, they place little trust in the authorities' accounts of how and why things happen. Local government officials in particular have an interest in protecting a positive image of the locality. The tendency of local officials to underestimate problems and exaggerate qualities of the locality was acknowledged as a problem during the Mao era, and has continued to the present day. This makes it less sensitive for journalists to approach problems at the local scale of the

state. Nevertheless, central authorities often support the local authorities' version of reality, rather than protecting journalists' investigations in local matters. When local authorities refuse journalists permission to investigate an accident, they receive support from the central Propaganda Department which communicates the message to all news organizations. To the extent that critical journalists limit themselves to investigating concrete problems at the local scale of the state, they can be seen as government watchdogs. But local incidents also reveal systemic problems, and may therefore be seen as jeopardising national interests. That is why *Southern Weekend* journalist Xu Feng tries to act as quickly as possible when he decides to investigate a case. He talks to people and tries to find out what really happened. Even when the case he is working on is closed by the Propaganda Department, he believes in the importance of being present. To him it is important to know, even though he will not be able to publish a story. Perhaps, at a later stage, when the political climate has changed, he will be able to explain what really happened. Xu Feng's belief in the importance of being present is also indicative of his idealist convictions, in that he believes that his own journalistic practices can contribute to a more just society.

One story Xu Feng has not yet been able to tell concerns an explosion in a school in Jiangxi province in March 2001 where 42 children were killed. This was the beginning of a case that illustrated the importance of journalists' presence on the scene of an attempt to cover up an incident, the tendency of local authorities to underreport problems and central authorities' protection of local authorities in such circumstances. After the explosion, Xu Feng was one of several journalists to come. He soon discovered that materials for making firecrackers had been stored inside the

school and had caused the explosion. He conducted interviews with local people, took photos of the deceased children in their homes, and in the place where their small, wooden coffins were made. People told him the children were making firecrackers for one hour every day that to make money for the school. It was being said that children's small fingers were especially suited to this work and that a child could fasten a fuse in a firecracker twice as fast as a grown-up. A local newspaper published a short report about the explosion, which mentioned the number of deceased, and stated that the reason was the production of firecrackers.

From then on other interests decided the news coverage. The provincial media reported the explosion, but said nothing about the cause apart from the fact that the circumstances were under investigation. As usual after major accidents, a local investigation committee was set up and was entitled to regulate journalists' access to the area. It denied journalists further access, and the Propaganda Department spread the message that nothing was to be written about the case. Only the official news bureau, Xinhua, was allowed to publish news items about the accident. In the Xinhua report, the entire story was changed and the explosion was blamed on a madman. Allegedly, a lunatic had entered the school carrying explosives and the police investigation was said to prove that the body of the man had been found and identified (Interview, Xu Feng, Shi Youli). This case exemplifies a typical procedure in which local authorities decide to cover up a case and central authorities support this decision. The journalists who witnessed what had really happened challenge the authorities' right to retouch history. Xu Feng's photos are visual evidence of what really happened, and he served as a kind of watchdog, even though he was prevented from publishing his story.

It must be admitted that the question of whether critical journalists are independent watchdogs or employed on government mission has a weakness. It furthers traditional binary thinking, and is too crude to capture the hybrid forms of journalism developing within the Chinese media field today. Journalists such as Xu Feng who are independent-minded and defy restrictions contribute to extending the parameters of what Chinese journalists can do. Others do investigative work, but limit themselves to officially endorsed issues, or produce their stories for the internal channel. For instance, journalists at the Xinhua news agency continue to write internal reports that go directly to the political leadership (Interview, Feng Junjiu, Wang Yi, Feng Lihong). To the extent that the objectives of journalists are restricted to helping individuals who suffer from local authorities' abuses of power, they do not explicitly question the legitimacy of the central level of the state. On the contrary, the problems they address can contribute to making the government appear more responsive and compassionate. This has been a common argument about TV shows such as *Focus (Jiaodian Fangtan)*, which only features problems that can be easily rectified and contributes to a positive image of the central authorities (Chan 2002). In this sense, critical journalism can be seen as a continuation of the mouthpiece role of the media, as it serves a propaganda purpose. Finally, there are newspapers within party-state organizations that uncover important social issues, but they also have to uphold their role as a particular organization's mouthpiece.

A major problem inherent in combining the mouthpiece role with independent, investigative journalism is one of trust. Propaganda is designed to provoke a specific reaction, while investigative journalism is defined by its problem-oriented content and by its methods. *China*

*Women's News* (*Zhongguo Funü Bao*) is a paper which combines critically oriented news with traditional propaganda. The paper is the mouthpiece of the mass organization *All China Women's Federation*. Its propaganda content consists mainly of pieces in which the local divisions write their accounts of what they have done in order to present a convincing and positive image of their own practice. The problem for the paper occurs when they want to put forward a more critical voice, because their continuing to promote propaganda content makes their real news harder to believe (Interview, Zhu Yang). The paper then depends on skilful readers' ability to separate between the typical patterns of the propaganda texts and freer and more *real* journalism.

Another hybrid form of journalistic agency can be found in the conception of the journalist as activist. To some journalists, the most relevant response when their capacity to influence through independent reporting is restricted, is to engage in politics as social activists. Seminars and meetings offer a third channel, in addition to the open press and the internal channel. Meetings offer an opportunity to exchange views and to write reports and articles, and constitute a more direct way of influencing government officials (Interview Zhu Yang). For journalists to engage as activists within a mass organization is a way of engaging in advocacy on social issues without challenging the authority and legitimacy of the party-state.

The loyal critique is a genre with deep historical roots in China. To journalists, Liu Binyan exemplifies a person who has advocated press freedom without denouncing the party's legitimacy. Liu Binyan was famous for his investigative reports exposing corruption and mismanagement within the party. He was himself a loyal party member, but none-

theless claimed that the CCP's policies and practices needed to be improved (de Burgh 2003b). However, Liu Binyan's story also shows the fear within the CCP about the exposure of problems that cannot easily be addressed and rectified. Liu was expelled from the CCP because he wrote articles which claimed that party members could have opinions different from the party's line or Mao. After the violent crackdown on the democracy movement in 1989, Liu Binyan's belief in the potential of the party was shattered, but in the article *Press freedom: Particles in the air* (Liu 1990), he expressed a strong faith in the Chinese people and its resistance against authoritarian and unfair rule. This shows the critical potential of investigative news. Even for the journalists who keep their work well within the limits posed by the party-state, their investigations raise their own and others' awareness of problems and paradoxes within Chinese society. The ambition of the journalists who work for *Southern Weekend* has been to provide marginalized people with a voice, and to serve as a mediator between them and the authorities. This ambition is symptomatic of the aims of critical Chinese journalists.

#### NORMALIZING CRITICAL DISCOURSE

As a result of the development of more critical journalism within the Chinese media, the range of topics written about in the press expanded. This development challenged the hegemonic mouthpiece discourse, because it conveyed negative images of China and Chinese society. Social and environmental problems, grievances, crime and corruption were issues that had not previously been discussed within the open press, and making these topics part of the public sphere was contradictory to the mouthpiece media's emphasis on positive news.



Critical journalists have tried to normalize their discursive and social practices by connecting them to aspects of the mouthpiece role, such as 'serving the public'. They acknowledge social stability as a discursive nodal point, but they argue that this is better protected by providing people with knowledge of the social conditions of the country, rather than keeping them ignorant and susceptible to rumours. However, social stability remains the benchmark against which critical discourse is measured. Fear of mass panic and protests constitutes one principal aspect of the limitation of critical discourse, and 'the political' comprises another. Everything that is defined to be within the vital interests of CCP is defined as political; within the field of the political, the rules of the propaganda system must be followed. This makes politics and the political taboo for critical, investigative journalism.

The development and normalization of critical journalism in the Chinese press has depended on discursive means to achieve representation for it as a legitimate part of the media. The category of 'social news' has been such a tool, and as such has been crucial for raising and promoting new issues in Chinese public discourse. Social news has been construed as clearly separate from politics. This category includes topics such as environmental disasters, corruption, violence against women, the performance of the legal system, the health system and violations of constitutional rights. The framing of these issues has made it possible to represent them as something apart from politics, and as not directly related to the government's performance.

From the mid 1990s *Southern Weekend* started to write more extensively about social news. Fan Yihong explains that earlier, they had published longer articles written by academics and authors in a supplement,

and these essays had proved popular and influential. *Southern Weekend* formed a group of their own journalists who started to look into the problems faced by ordinary Chinese, and the paper devoted more space to covering social problems. Fan says that the aim of *Southern Weekend* was to promote democracy and the legal system, and to do that they chose to focus on the situation of peasants, the unemployed and other weak and powerless groups in society. Seen from the outside, this is an explicit political objective, but within the Chinese media discourse, this aim was conducted under the heading of social news. This also meant that concepts such as 'democracy' and 'rule of law' had to be given a content that did not challenge the rule or legitimacy of CCP. The way this has typically been done is by emphasising incremental, small steps towards more accountable and less corrupt social practices, while never questioning the legitimacy of CCP rule.

Within these limitations, *Southern Weekend's* articles nevertheless represented a new development within Chinese journalism, and readers considered its coverage of social problems to be brave and innovative. As previously mentioned in this chapter, the traditional/modern dichotomy is used to align investigative, bottom-up journalism with modernity and development, and to distance it from propaganda as traditional and backwards. In *Southern Weekend* journalists did the same within the category of social news. Wu Yunlu explains that traditional, old-fashioned social news follows a set formula. For instance, when an accident has taken place, it describes how many people who were injured or killed, how serious the damage was and finally what the government has done to put things right again. He says that modern social news, on the other hand, breaks with this formula and describes problems that are not yet

resolved and problems that have more structural causes. Wu Yunlu's explanation of the difference between traditional and modern social news is equivalent to the difference between the mouthpiece role of the media and critical journalism. However, Wu avoids terms that indicate opposition, instead choosing to present *Southern Weekend's* social news as a natural part of modern media.

In addition to *Southern Weekend*, other papers have also been central in developing new ways of reporting about social problems. *China Youth Daily* (*Zhongguo Qingnian Bao*) and *Beijing Youth Daily* (*Beijing Qingnian Bao*) have contributed to increasing Chinese investigative journalism's critical capacity. *China Youth Daily* has been central in breaking a long-standing taboo against reports about environmental disasters. Such reports were not allowed in the reign of propaganda journalism, which is strange since they could not be blamed on the party-state. Gries and Rosen (2004) suggest that a possible basis for this taboo can be found in Chinese society's Confucian heritage, in which environmental disasters could be a sign that the emperor was not fulfilling his heavenly mandate and that protests were justified. Another reason might be that within the high modernist project which constituted CCP's transformation of China, man's control over nature was a central aspect (Scott 1998), and admitting the existence of natural disasters could thus threaten the legitimacy of the ruling authorities. The first reports about environmental disasters in the Chinese media came during the 1980s. In 1987 Chinese media reported on a gigantic forest fire that started in Heilongjiang province and later spread to Inner Mongolia. It killed 200 people and left 50,000 homeless (Interview, Zhao Sanpeng). During the 1990s environmental news became more common, but they remained contested and were not included

as a natural, unproblematic part of the news discourse. In a survey of 52 major national and local newspapers from 1996, less than 0,5% of the press coverage was devoted to environmental news. Even within this tiny fraction of the general content, only a small part consisted of critical articles (Zhao 1998). Zhao Sanpeng explained that as late as in 1998 authorities placed a ban on news coverage during a serious flood in Jiujiang. The dykes were about to burst, but journalists were not allowed to write about it. *China Youth Daily* chose to defy the authorities and published the story. This inspired the local paper to publish the information, something that was very important in informing the locals that they needed to evacuate.

Another important topic that was introduced in Chinese news discourse as 'social news' was the recruitment system for the courts. In 1997 a scholar from Peking University, He Weifang, wrote an article in *Southern Weekend* where he criticized the practice of employing retired army officials as judges. He argued that former army employees did not have any relevant qualifications and lacked an understanding of the independence of the judiciary (Interview, Fan Yihong). The paper exposed and criticized malpractice within the Chinese judiciary by presenting concrete cases demonstrating the effect this practice had on people's life. In order to represent the topic as legitimate, the paper emphasised how the disclosure of corruption within the judiciary was in the interest of the public as well as the party-state. The argument did not touch upon the lack of an independent judiciary, but only stated that corruption reduced people's belief in the fairness of the judicial system. This made it possible for the party-state authorities to perceive this critique as limited and concrete. Together with the pressure generated by media attention, He Wei-

fang's article ended up being very influential. A few years later screening procedures in the recruitment of judges were established, judges were required to have a minimum level of education and had to pass a national examination. This has made it increasingly difficult for retired army officials to use a position as a judge as a means of increasing their personal wealth (Interview, Fan Yihong).

The changes within Chinese news discourse during the 1990s did not only challenge the authorities' conception of legitimate topics for the open news media. A topic such as domestic violence was met with resistance, also within the media, because it was regarded as a social taboo and was looked upon as a marginal problem. In 1991, the female lawyer Pi Xiaoming published a "White paper on domestic violence". Her publication was met with incredulity and Cai, Feng and Guo (2001) describe how the paper was received:

When the article was presented to the chief editor of a major newspaper in Beijing, his reaction was, 'Domestic violence? Is there violence in the family? What does that mean?' His subordinate replied that it basically means physical abuse inflicted by husbands on their wives. The editor then asked: 'Physical abuse? Do men nowadays beat their wives? Do you hit your wife?' His subordinate said 'No'. Then the chief editor turned to another assistant editor and asked the same question, again receiving the answer 'No'. He therefore concluded, 'You don't hit your wife, he doesn't hit his, I don't hit my wife either. This issue has no general applicability or interest.'

(Cai et al. 2001:210)

Domestic violence is a sensitive issue because it threatens the established discourse on gender relations in China. During the Mao era men and women were defined as equal, and news about violence within the family did not reach the public. Even the term 'domestic violence' (*jiating*

*baoli*) did not exist, and to the extent violence within the family was recognized as a problem, it was linked with ignorant, uneducated peasants (Interview, Zhu Yang). When the white paper on domestic violence stated that domestic violence occurred in urban areas as well as in the countryside, and that it was quite common, editors did not want to engage with it at first. The paper *China Women's News* (*Zhongguo Funü Bao*) aimed to introduce a new discourse that would recognize discrimination against women as a social problem. The paper published a series of articles about domestic violence in 1996, served as a forum for discussion about domestic violence and received many letters from its readers (Interview, Zhu Yang). The paper succeeded in the sense that domestic violence became a more normal topic, and articles and discussions about domestic violence also appeared outside the women's media to which *China Women's News* belongs (de Burgh 2003a). The formation of a public discourse about domestic violence, and the resistance it was met with, illustrates how changes in Chinese media discourse during the 1990s were not only related to state-society relations and regulations. Patriarchy and gender relations within the media also contributed to the understanding of domestic violence as a marginal and sensitive issue.

### *Summing up*

The CCP leadership has never officially redefined the political role of the Chinese media, and the hegemonic mouthpiece discourse of Chinese media still restricts what journalists can and cannot communicate to the public. The changes that have taken place in the organization of the media field and in media practices have evolved gradually. Today, the Chinese media is diversified and characterized by a wide array of media

outlets offering products that cater to the interests of the audience. One aspect of this development has been the expansion in critical journalism within some media. The newspaper *Southern Weekend* has been particularly important in this process. Critical and investigative journalism challenges the mouthpiece role of the media, while simultaneously adapting to a controlled media environment. Critical journalists utilize the tension between the propaganda and the informational aspects within the mouthpiece role of the media when they refer to *servicing the public* as central to their role as journalists. Critical journalists balance between independence and loyalty, criticism and propaganda, but their journalism has nonetheless contributed to making social problems part of the Chinese public sphere. The naturalization strategies of critical journalists represent their journalism as a legitimate and necessary part of the Chinese media. Through this they contribute to redefining the political role of the critical press, so that it includes people's right to be informed and the exposure of official power abuse and injustice.

## Chapter six

# **The polyphony of Chinese critical press discourse**

The post-Mao transformation of Chinese society has improved the living conditions of millions of people. But in the process of reforming itself, China has become one of the most inequitable countries in the world. Since the 1990s, there have been frequent protests where poor people, peasants and unemployed workers and others have voiced their grievances and complaints (Shue and Wong 2007). The pace, the policies and the implementation of economic reforms in China are not unchallenged, and this has been an area of debate Chinese journalists have had to approach in a very careful manner. The human and environmental costs connected to the transition from a planned economy to a market economy constitute a highly sensitive aspect of the public discourse on the 'opening and reform' (*gaige kaifang*) of China. By creating ways of reflecting social problems and bringing new topics into public discourse, journalists seek to contribute to change. It is not possible to say whether or not the media's focus on inequality and the pains of transition has influenced the Chinese party-state authorities, but since the late 1990s the Chinese party-state has increasingly addressed the problem of deepening inequality (Shue and Wong 2007).



As discussed in the previous chapter, the hegemonic role of the Chinese media is to serve as the mouthpiece of the CCP. Accompanying this role is a set of limitations regarding what journalists can and cannot do, such as the requirement for 80% positive news. The mouthpiece discourse construes social problems as negative news, and these are supposed to be limited in the open media. Critical journalism in China becomes what it is in relation to the mouthpiece role; and in critical discourse the mouthpiece discourse is present as a *defining other*. Its traces are evident in discursive adjustment and in telling absences, and this contributes to the polyphonic character of critical media discourse. The first part of this chapter investigates how polyphonic expressions come about in critical media discourse. The second part explores how social problems are presented through narratives about individuals' suffering and misery. This is a way of conveying information about problems that evades the limitations placed on negative news by the mouthpiece discourse. The final section discusses the potential for criticism in the problem-oriented articles under consideration, namely the following four articles from the newspaper *Southern Weekend*:

- *The strange disease (Guai bing)*, printed in *Southern Weekend* November 11, 2000
- *Three -year-old AIDS victim (San sui de xiao aizibingren)*, printed in *Southern Weekend* November 11, 2000
- *Nine media houses sued for infringement of rights (Jiu jia meiti bei su qinquan)*, printed in *Southern Weekend* January 18, 2000
- *State-owned coal mines: difficulties beyond security (Guoyou meikuang: anquan zhiwai de kunjing)*, printed in *Southern Weekend* August 1, 2002

The first two articles appeared on the same day and both deal with the problem of AIDS. *The strange disease* is an investigative report about the spread of AIDS in Henan province and describes the causes and consequences of an AIDS epidemic. *Three -year-old AIDS victim* recounts the history of a little girl who is an HIV carrier and whose mother died of AIDS. The third article, *Nine media houses sued for infringement of rights*, is an investigation of a corruption scandal in Heilongjiang province, while the fourth, *State-owned coal mines: difficulties beyond security*, discusses problems in the mining sector. Its starting point is a mining accident, but the main part of the article analyses the economic and political roots of the problems faced by state-owned coal mines.

These texts illustrate some of the discursive characteristics of critical journalism in China. The manner in which these articles express causal relationships, align signs and create oppositions is not only a result of individual journalists' choices and strategies. A newspaper article, or any text, is not a bounded entity conveying an original utterance. Through intertextuality, elements from different texts are combined, and any author will select elements from existing discursive repertoires (Fairclough 1995). The articles I analyse in this chapter are long and complex texts, and they are well suited for illustrating how typical topics within the critical media discourse are represented in a polyphonic manner. The main reason, however, for choosing these four articles is that they provide a window onto a process of discursive structuration in which the texts are discursive actors.

## **POLYPHONIC REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

Recent developments within the Chinese media field have opened the way for more critical journalism and for a new media discourse that is making social problems part of the public sphere. The hegemonic political role of the Chinese media is still defined through the mouthpiece discourse, and this restricts what critical journalists can and cannot write about. Nevertheless, critical journalism has expanded the range of topics it is possible to discuss within the public sphere, so a central question is *how social problems are approached within critical media discourse?* Within the context of the controlled, Chinese media, social issues must be framed in a way that makes them fall within the sphere of what is politically accepted. Interviews with critical journalists in China show that this is partly a conscious matter of evaluating possible consequences of their reports. However, their textual strategies are influenced and enabled by a Chinese discourse of critical journalism that reflects limitations imposed upon the freedom of expression. One of the characteristics of this discourse is the polyphonic mode of discussing problematic social issues.

The term polyphony was used by the Russian writer and theorist Bakhtin to describe the presence of many voices within the same text. He analysed Dostoevsky's work and described the independent and conflicting voices of the characters in his novels. The characters are not subordinate to their author – their voices are as important as his – and the novels become dialogues between different characters (Bakhtin 1991). When this perspective is transferred from Dostoevsky and fictional literature to research-based non-fiction texts, the different voices of characters become the different voices of the various perspectives in a text (Tønnesson 2001). Polyphonic narratives increase the number of ways a text can be read,

because the relation between the different perspectives in the text is undefined. This complexity gives the reader an active role. Polyphony can contribute to making a text more interesting, but probably the most important advantage of polyphony in the critical media discourse in China is that it provides camouflage for critical messages. When critical journalists break with the limitations built into the mouthpiece role of media, their resistance must be carefully formulated. When it comes to voicing opposition in the context of domination, Scott comments that “for good reasons, nothing is entirely straightforward here; the realities of power for subordinate groups mean that much of their political action requires interpretation because it is intended to be cryptic and opaque” (Scott 1990:137). Subordinate groups typically insinuate their resistance in disguised forms into the public transcript; one way this is accomplished within the Chinese media field is through polyphonic expressions that make texts open to diverse interpretations. As illustrated in Nathan’s (1985) work about the various decoding strategies employed in reading propaganda (discussed in chapter 4), the audience has played an important role in interpreting and reading between the lines of propaganda journalism. People have often assumed that the truth was probably closer to a reversed or twisted version of the text that was presented to them (Ma 2000). The current diversification of the Chinese media continues to require an audience skilled at decoding different genres and their various purposes. Problem-oriented, investigative articles from Southern Weekend are complex texts that combine different messages. This makes various interpretations possible. Different readers, such as a critical, progressive student and a conservative, responsible government official can read the same text, but because they relate in different ways to the various

voices in the text, their interpretations can remain divergent. This contributes to disguising resistance and is a discursive strategy used by critical journalists in a controlled media environment.

The tension between the media's assigned role as the mouthpiece for the party-state's ideological apparatus and the new media roles that have developed during the period of economic reform means that critical reports must be carefully framed. The mouthpiece discourse is hegemonic, and the media must abide by its rules when reporting about political and sensitive issues. As discussed in chapter 5, the category 'social news' has been crucial for establishing a new and more critical media discourse, because the sign 'social' is construed as separate from 'political'. According to the journalists interviewed, the marking of issues as 'not political' is perhaps the most important precondition for publication of critical issues (Interview, Shi Youli, Ai Hongwen). One way of doing this is by including characteristics of propaganda discourse in critical, investigative reports. This polyphony contributes to a dialogue of voices between critical discourse and propaganda discourse.

Polyphony is a way of creating meaning within one discourse through a dialogue with, or an awareness of, other discourses (Sletteland 2008). Bakhtin distinguishes between three types of polyphonic utterances. The first is expressions that imitate the style and characteristics of another discourse, in order to become as similar as possible. The second is expressions that use another discourse, but for a different purpose than the intentions inscribed in the original discourse. Contradictory intentions are played off against each other within the text, and the new discourse forces the old to serve another purpose than the one originally intended. Both imitations and parodies relate to the other discourse as a passive

voice, while the third form of polyphony is characterized by an active relationship with the other discourse. This category includes texts that are framed as being conscious of, and in relation to, the other discourse (Børtnes 1999). In the critical media discourse in China, the awareness of and relation to the propaganda discourse contributes to a polyphonic mode of expression. When critical, investigative reports are written with explicit or implicit references to the need to protect social stability, this is an example of an active dialogue between discourses. Børtnes (1999) argues that dialogic, linguistic structures are characterized by not being dominated by the intentions of their author, as the various discourses continue to forward their own, sometimes conflicting perspectives, within the same text.

Critical journalism in China is mainly defined in relation to the propaganda discourse, but is also in dialogue with entertainment and consumer journalism. The inclusion of traits from the propaganda discourse within critical, investigative reports serves a double function. It contributes to confirming the hegemonic position of the mouthpiece role of media while simultaneously challenging the propaganda discourse. For instance, when critical reports are framed according to a perceived need to protect social stability, this affirms the position of 'social stability' as a discursive nodal point. On the other hand, when critical journalists conduct critical investigations into state-sanctioned topics, they may exceed the intended limitations within propaganda discourse. This has been the case for reports about AIDS in Chinese media.

In 1998 state ministries and agencies published a booklet titled "Ten key messages on HIV/AIDS prevention", which was meant to be used as the basis for educating the general public about the topic through the

media. A year later, central media institutions were requested to focus on AIDS-prevention education as one of the major propaganda issues. This made AIDS a state-sanctioned topic, and included it as part of the media's mouthpiece role (UNAIDS 2002). The inherent limitations in the mouthpiece role, however, requires that reports show the party-state in a good light and create a positive attitude in the audience. In the eyes of critical journalists, these requirements did not fit comfortably with the situation for AIDS victims in China around 2000. Even though the central authorities requested that information about AIDS should be provided through the media, journalists discussed how they should conduct this work while avoiding having negative sanctions imposed, because the problem under discussion was so serious (Interview, Fan Yihong). One discursive strategy employed for this purpose has been to respect the requirement of correct timing that is embedded in propaganda journalism. Timing is connected to the instrumental perspective on news which requires that the effect of information is valued above people's right to know. For instance, major political events or holidays require increased emphasis on positive news. December 1 is the United Nations' AIDS day, and this day has provided a framework for publishing AIDS-related news in the Chinese media. The CCP uses the day to demonstrate what the party-state is doing for AIDS victims, and the media's linkage of reports about AIDS to this particular day serves as an acknowledgement of the hegemony of the mouthpiece discourse. This creates some room for manoeuvre, enabling critical and investigative reports on such a serious topic, because journalists and editors utilize the symbols attached to correct timing in the mouthpiece discourse.

In the late 1990s it was generally believed that AIDS did not exist in China. It was looked upon as a mysterious disease and considered shameful. As with domestic violence, the idea that media ought to cover AIDS was also met with resistance among journalists because would reveal the existence of a problem that people were ignorant about and evoke social taboos. In spite of the party-state's encouragement for writing about AIDS, journalists still discussed whether or not writing about it could affect social stability. The uncertain status of this topic made the first reports about AIDS in Southern Weekend vague and abstract (Interview, Fan Yihong).

In 2000, when Southern Weekend started to investigate the AIDS problem in Henan, journalists emphasised poverty as the explanatory cause behind AIDS. The beginning of the article "The strange disease" (Guai bing), printed in Southern Weekend on November 11, 2000 states that "the most important reason is poverty". The article argues that all of the people who are infected with the HIV virus embody stories of misery. This is significant because it transfers the sign 'AIDS' from a health discourse to a development discourse. According to Fairclough (1992, 1995) transferring elements from one discourse to another is a way of fostering social change. When this article about AIDS in Henan discusses the illness as a developmental issue, it relies on the status of economic development as a less sensitive issue to discuss a much more sensitive issue. AIDS is positioned in a context where economic reform and growth are emphasised, and the potential cost of the problem shows why AIDS is a necessary and acceptable topic. In other aspects the article retains its state-sanctioned educational purpose, for example by informing people of how to protect themselves against the HIV virus.



Traces of propaganda journalism might be read as the paying of lip service to the authorities' media control system, but it is not necessarily as clear as that. If these aspects of the article are interpreted as one perspective that contributes to the polyphony of the text, they cater to the readers who insist on the mouthpiece role of media. However, the rest of the article about AIDS in Henan exposes the reader to a thorough description of the suffering of the peasants involved. Transferring techniques and angles from propaganda journalism to negative, investigative news also challenges the propaganda discourse because it makes visible the kind of information that is left out of the so-called positive news.

The traces of propaganda discourse in critical articulations contribute to the polyphonic character of the articles, but other discursive strategies also add to the openness to interpretation of these texts. In many ways, these texts attempt to show rather than to tell the readers about the issues at stake. Showing and telling are narratological concepts that refer to the way a situation is mediated. When something is described 'as it is', and the description conveys a feeling of witnessing the situation, the text applies 'showing'. 'Telling' is when the narrative describes, evaluates or analyses a situation. From a theoretical point of view the distinction between showing and telling is fragile. Because the world cannot be approached directly, and signs are discursively mediated, there is no substantial difference between showing and telling. However, within a text, the difference between direct and indirect representation can be quite powerful (Cobley 2003). Photos are used to the same effect, as they appear to be unmediated and give the reader an opportunity to interpret the situation; while telling seems to add a layer of interpretation between the reader and the text.

The voices of the people interviewed in the articles are another source contributing to the polyphonic expression of these texts. The interviewees are selected because they experience a problem themselves, or because their relatives do, while others are interviewed because of their profession, for instance as doctors or public officials. The interviewees lend authenticity to the story, and their voices illustrate different aspects of the problems discussed. The voices of the interviewees also contribute to the construction of the journalist's role as an objective mediator. However, most of the interviewees are anonymous, as is common in Chinese news discourse. The absence of openness and transparency is probably mostly due to people's fear of the problems which could arise if they revealed their names, but sometimes anonymous sources are simply fictional, and only function as means for journalists to present their own views. This has been quite common within propaganda journalism (Interview, Xu Feng), and is another feature that adds to the polyphony of critical discourse.

### **MISERY AND HUMAN TRAGEDY**

The articles about AIDS, *The strange disease* and *Three -year-old AIDS victim*, and the article *State owned coal mines: difficulties beyond security* all contain vivid descriptions of human misery, suffering and tragedy. Much of the journalism presented under the heading of 'social news' in China mediates suffering through representations of individuals who find themselves in difficult and painful situations. A media discourse that conveys misery and people's grievances outlines possible subject positions for the audience. When suffering is mediated in a way that makes it feel real and acute to the audience, the readers are drawn in as compas-

sionate and supportive witnesses, and as critical judges of power abuse and injustice. These subject positions establish a relation between text and audience that is very different from the relation between propaganda discourse and its audience.

Representations of misery have been a politicized topic in China. Mao gave a speech in Yan'an in 1942 about the role of culture that established the dogma that cultural expressions should serve the revolution by inspiring people in their efforts to construct a new China. This raised the question of whether or not portrayals of the darker aspects of society could perform this positive function (Børdal 1978). Within culture in general and media in particular, the emphasis was on the propaganda purpose, and this required media to focus on positive news (Lee 1990). This means that in contemporary China, portrayals of misery in the open media appear to be part of the modern and 'new' media discourse.

Descriptions of distant suffering can be placed on a scale ranging from fact-giving reports without any emotional elements, to individualized narratives that connect suffering with pity (Chouliaraki 2006). Within the Chinese critical media discourse, the tendency has been to relate towards stories of individuals who find themselves in a difficult situation. In the Chinese media context, reports about suffering individuals enjoy a double advantage: such representations evoke an emotive function that creates a bond between reader and the text, and individualized representations of suffering offer a way of discussing complex social problems that would otherwise be judged too sensitive to be published.

Representing social issues through the personal experiences of people who are struggling with problems gives readers concrete cases to relate to. The AIDS problem in Henan province is the topic of the article *The*

*strange disease*, but it is approached through the narratives of individuals who describe how the disease has influenced their lives. They explain that they sold their own blood to earn money. The social background of this phenomenon is that blood has been a commodity in China, and as late as in 1998, voluntary blood donations were estimated to constitute only 22% of the total clinical blood consumption (UNAIDS 2004). The remaining volume came from mainly poor, rural residents who earned money from selling their own blood. People did not have the necessary knowledge to protect themselves, and they did not know how illnesses could be transmitted. The article explains how *blood pimps* organized the blood business, going into villages and advertising their business, saying that giving blood was healthy. In the late 1980s, the buyers started to collect blood plasma instead of whole blood. After the plasma had been collected, the remaining part of the blood would be re-injected into the donor to avoid anaemia. In the process of collecting plasma, blood from several persons was pooled, and if blood from one person was infected with HIV, the others would be infected too upon re-injection. There were no antiseptic controls in place, and the lack of general hygienic practices is expressed in the formulation “people did not even wash their faces”. The description of the blood business conjures up an image of people lying everywhere; every flat surface was used, with people stretching out first one arm, then the other. Needles were used several times and not properly cleaned between uses.

This was how the people interviewed in the article became infected with the HIV virus. The scope of the problem is not explicitly established through the author’s voice, but is rather indicated by the disastrous effect the disease has on people’s lives. Two women, Liu Xiaorong, 33 years

old, and Chen Nan, 48, tell their own stories of how their lives are falling apart: their husbands are ill and can hardly stand upright, their children have dropped out of school, the fields lie fallow and medical expenses have left their families heavily indebted. Their testimonies show the social consequences of AIDS and demonstrate that AIDS is not only a health issue. It involves the entire community, including children. The two women's suffering is described in a visual manner. The reader's attention is directed to the details of each person's appearance and to the derelict surroundings. The visual descriptions of human misery contribute to polyphony because they leave open the possibility of a spectrum of reactions. Explanations and accusations are not brought into the text, and the reader may choose to understand the situation either as a pitiful single case of human misery, or as evidence of structural injustice and the rich/poor divide. The visual descriptions are an example of narrative *showing*, in that they seem to confront the reader with the world 'as it is'.

To activate readers' compassion, the audience must feel that it is about real people, because "pity is not inspired by generalities" (Boltanski 1999:11). The interviewees' names, their accounts of symptoms and sorrow and detailed descriptions of their surroundings all contribute to this. A European study has shown that an audience's compassion depends on the character of the victims. People are more likely to feel compassion for women, children and the elderly, while male adults are not seen as deserving victimhood (Höijer 2004). Portrayals of the right victims presented in a way that makes them feel familiar increase the readers' capacity to relate to their suffering. In the first part of the article about AIDS in Henan, the reader's attention is tuned in towards the concrete, local and human face of AIDS in China:

A ray of the setting sun comes through the narrow doorway, slips through the reed-bamboo curtain, falling partly on the body of a woman, clutching her quilt while sleeping, partly on a broken fodder bowl in front of the bed. The woman is Sun Aijuan, who cannot get up because of a prolonged 'strange illness', her vomit is in the basin, covered with soil.

The description of the light connects the outside of the house with its inside and becomes a metaphor for the connection between the reader as an outsider in the meeting with the couple and their situation. The woman inside has the "strange illness" and is unable to get up. Her husband stands by the bed and tells the story of his wife's illness. At first she thought it was a cold, but the fever never went away, nor did the diarrhoea. She visited a few doctors, and the prescribed medication always improved her condition for three days, then she fell ill again. It then dawned on her that this was "the strange disease". Now her husband suffers from the symptoms too. Their misery is boundless, and it seems to the audience that life could hardly be any worse than it is for these two.

Readers' identification with the suffering individuals is facilitated by the narrative's positioning of the interviewees' subject positions at the forefront. The portrayals of the married couples and other AIDS victims in Henan focus on these individuals' close surroundings and their relations to children, parents and family. This contributes to a discursive normalization of otherwise distant suffering, and enables similarities with the readers' lives to become a source of identification. For instance, AIDS victim Liu Xiaorong underlines her subject position as a mother when she explains why she sold blood: "At that time the kids were small and weren't eating. I just wanted to draw blood for money to give the children something good to eat." As a parent she was willing to go to extremes to ensure her children's well-being. This is a recognizable emo-

tion, even for people whose life situations are very different. Her choice becomes more understandable and the focus on her subject position as a mother normalizes her account. The audience knows what it means to be a mother, a father or a spouse, and can relate to the sorrow of losing family members to a disease. The word AIDS is absent in the first part of the article. Instead, symptoms are mentioned: fever, chills and nausea. These are recognizable to most people, and the descriptions of the symptoms make it possible to understand what people suffering from AIDS actually feel like. In this way the normalization of the victims' suffering contributes to creating responsiveness to the text as well as the feeling that 'this could happen to me or my family'.

The tragedy conveyed in the texts about AIDS is constructed around the disastrous and unsettling effect the disease has on people's lives. Where there would normally be happiness, there is only sorrow, and people who are in the prime of life are facing death. This reversal of everything normal is particularly strong in the article about the three-year-old girl with AIDS. Her mother was infected with HIV when she received a blood transfusion while giving birth to her daughter. The girl was infected too, and this was the beginning of their misery. This article presents a narrative of a little girl who is deprived of everything that is seen as essential in a child's life. Her mother dies. Other children are not allowed to play with her. The family's neighbours have abandoned the common courtyard and she is growing up as a completely lonely child. When she wants to buy candy, the salespeople in the stalls run away from her and will not even touch her money. Doctors say that her life will be short, and that she will probably die before she is ten. Her father's situation is dark, he grieves over the loss of his wife and the community's

irrational discrimination against his daughter. If it were not for the contaminated blood, the little family would have led a normal, happy life. This makes the worry, sorrow and anger of the father understandable, and compassion and pity become a likely response in the reader.

Close descriptions and normalization constitute two different aspects of the emotive function of these articles. Through such descriptions the audience becomes familiar with the people in the texts, their names and their fates. At the outset, the relation between a reader and the people in a newspaper article is inscribed with distance. It seems unlikely that the situation could be reversed. But by portraying people from the angle of their subject positions, and by illustrating the short distance between happiness and sorrow, these portrayals of misery set distance and closeness into play in a way that brings the far-away misery closer.

The thin line between normal everyday life and catastrophe is also central in the article about the explosion in the coalmine in Heilongjiang. The text describes how the 29-year-old husband of Wu Jinyan got up from bed, had breakfast, grabbed an umbrella and left for work. Two hours later the pit exploded and he was buried 800 meters below the surface. She will never see him again. The fear of sudden tragic accidents is a common emotion, and these articles show how vulnerable people can be. This seems to tell the reader: it could happen to you too. No-one is safe. This generalization of suffering is as important for representations of misery as the concretization of each case. That is a paradox: the representations have to convey that each case is specific, but at the same time retain the notion that the people involved are interchangeable. "They therefore must be hyper-singularised through an accumulation of the details of suffering and, at the same time, underqualified: it is that child there



who makes us cry, but any other child could have done the same. Around each unfortunate brought forward crowds a host of replacements" (Boltanski 1999:11).

Birgitta Höijer has studied how European audiences react to exposure of distant suffering, such as victims of crises and wars. She writes that such questions have received little academic attention; we do not really know how people react to the emotional engagement the media offers (Höijer 2004). In these Chinese portrayals of misery, the expected reactions of the audience are written into the text through a meta-discourse that presents people's reactions to the narratives. The article about the three-year-old AIDS victim refers to responses from the readers received after a previous interview with her father that was printed a year earlier in *Southern Weekend*. The article says that feedback from the readers proved that people were deeply moved by the little girl's story. People sent her toys and clothes. One student at Beijing Science and Engineering University even sent little Kaijia money. The meta-discourse provides the audience with an emotional vocabulary, and terms such as *moved*, *speechless*, *uneasy* frequently appear in the texts, either as expressions for the journalist's voice in the text or as references to the general public and other actors that appear in the text.

Discourse theorists argue that discourses are political because any representation of the social world excludes other representations (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999). The representation of compassion and pity as the natural reaction to portrayals of misery excludes more explicitly political reactions. The articles construe compassion and pity as combining to form an impetus for charitable actions, not as a reason for protest. For instance, a local doctor who appears in the article about AIDS in Henan

contacted a medical professor because he “felt deeply that the conditions were too dire”. The professor came to the village and conducted blood samples that diagnosed the HIV carriers and explained their mystical symptoms. The narrative presents the doctor’s initiative as spurred by compassion rather than professional duty. This way, the article does *not* suggest that doctors’ failure to intervene can be blamed on their professionalism, as the emotional reaction is construed as the main factor behind the intervention. Hypothetically, the audience could have reacted in a more activist way and argued that the minister of health ought to resign or that hospitals should provide free treatment for AIDS patients. The discourse on suffering demonstrated in the articles contributes to making such reactions less likely. The meta-discourse on reactions present people as wide-eyed and tongue-tied (*chengmu jieshe*) when confronted with the dire conditions in the Henan countryside. The emotional vocabulary provides a discursive repertoire for understanding the text, and places peoples’ inner reactions at the forefront.

However, there is a tension within the articles between the emotional interpretation focusing on pity and compassion, and a more critical edge pointing towards the structural causes of individual misery. Both the articles about AIDS are built up around individualized narratives, but they appeared on the same day in Southern Weekend and when read together, there is a connection between them. The strange disease reports on the spread of AIDS in Henan that was caused by greedy ‘blood pimps’ who bought poor people’s blood and infected the donors in the process. They later sold blood to hospitals. This is where the article about the Three-year-old AIDS victim starts, as her mother was infected by a blood transfusion at the hospital. In other words, the scope of the AIDS prob-

lem in Henan is indicated by yet another individualized story, that indicates the possible range of the problem.

The narrative of the three-year-old girl's father touches upon two general problems. The first concerns the discrimination against HIV carriers in society, and exemplified by people's fearful behaviour around and avoidance of his daughter. The second aspect is his wish for someone to take responsibility for the loss of his wife and for his daughter's illness. Both problems are relevant to a large number of people; yet neither of the texts elaborates on the possible extent of the problem, instead retaining their focus on compassion and sympathy for the individual.

The article about the state-owned coal mine in some ways offers a reversed emphasis. In this text, the main focus is on the structural factors that may explain why accidents happen. This emphasis is balanced by the gripping portrayal of the young widow whose husband was one of the workers that were killed in the accident. Her sorrow is immense and the description plays a dual role in the text. It humanizes a more structural and technical topic, and the young widow's sorrow contributes to an intertextuality with other texts that apply individualized representations of social problems. This suggests to the audience that it is possible to read the article from the perspective of the human misery these structural problems cause. Second, the description of the widow's suffering exerts a transformative power on the information that 115 people were killed in the explosion in the mine. It accentuates the fact that for each one of the 115 men, there will be family and friends who mourn them. The various possible angles on the problem depicted in the article contribute to its polyphonic expression.

The articles' individualized portrayals of misery are also intertextually linked to petitions. Petitions represent a possibility for filing complaints with the authorities through the State Council or the National People's Congress. An individual's reasons for petitioning are usually connected to an experience of being subject to injustice, such as through a forced land acquisition by a local government or other instances of abuse of power by local officials. Petitions make sense as long as people believe in the existence of good officials within the higher echelons of the system, who will do their best to set things right. During the 1990s the number of petitions to upper-level officials increased dramatically, and this genre of political representation also made its appearance within the media. The problem oriented TV-program *Jiaodian Fangtan*, broadcast daily in prime time on CCTV 1, has at times received more than a thousand letters every day (Chan 2002). As with petitions, the media offers an opportunity to make stories from the local level known to the political authorities of the central state.

Zweig (2000) comments that the state seems to welcome petitions because they invite people to seek justice within legal bounds, and because petitions inform the party-state of problems in the countryside. Presenting petitions is a form of political protest that is more acceptable than other forms of protest in an authoritarian state, because individual officials, rather than the system, are blamed for the problems citizens face. Petitions can be conceived of as an apolitical protest form because they do not address the systemic reasons behind the problems from which people suffer. They are probably more acceptable also because it is easier to redress injustice done to one, than to an entire social group. The individualized representations of social problems in the media share this apo-

litical nature. Petitions are a contained form of political protest: as long as petitioners do not organize, they can be addressed or ignored one by one. In media representations of misery, concrete and individualized representations contribute to limiting the scope of the problems discussed.

Boltanski (1999) is optimistic about the political potential of mediated suffering. According to him, people actively involve themselves by talking and reacting to such news, and this forms a public opinion. In the Chinese media context, the descriptions of suffering people represent a kind of reportage that moves beyond the limits of propaganda journalism. These representations are not educational because they portray problems and do not offer any solutions. On the other hand, it is also possible to read them as replacements for investigative analysis which would emphasise the systemic weaknesses and institutional responsibility in each of the cases.

### **INDIRECT CRITICISM: INDICATING RESPONSIBILITY**

As discussed in chapter 5, the emergence of the category 'social news' as an accepted area of journalistic focus opened up a range of new topics in public discourse. For journalists social news offered a way to write about important problems in Chinese society, while avoiding 'the political' (Interview, Shi Youli). The institutionalization of social news as a category for critical and investigative journalism can be understood as an attempt to establish a new order of discourse that by definition is separate from the political order of discourse. In general explicit and direct criticism is avoided within 'social news'. Most obvious is the absence of critiques that touch upon structural explanations which might imply some responsibility on the part of the central authorities. When investigated cases involve

local level party-state institutions, these are mostly referred to in very vague terms and the criticism of public officials and departments appears only indirectly. However, the texts all seem to raise a silent question: "Shouldn't the government have interfered?" The articles analyse cases where people are portrayed as innocent victims who do not receive the protection as they ought to have done. This creates a tension within the texts. Emphasis on concrete and local explanatory factors on the one hand, and more structural explanations on the other contribute to the polyphony of the texts. This tension has a critical potential because it indirectly questions how these problems could arise in the first place.

Chinese journalists face a reality where injustice and abuse of power are ubiquitous. Many of the problems and issues Chinese journalists report about are connected to far-reaching structural changes that have taken place within Chinese economy and society during the last three decades. Among these are "galloping spatial and class inequality, the explosive growth of migrant labor, and loss of security and jobs for many state sector employees" (Perry and Selden 2000:1). Adding grave environmental problems, the deteriorating health system and corruption would still leave this list incomplete. Metaphorically, these problems can be represented as the pains of transition. The hegemonic discourse about China's development is centred around modernization and progress. The contrast between 'before' and 'now' is emphasised. 'Before' is connected to international isolation and a stagnant planned economy while 'now' is associated with modernity, economic growth and international recognition. Writing about problems, or the 'externalities' of reform as Perry and Selden (2001) formulate it, contributes to the formation of a counter discourse that destabilizes the dominating representation of China's devel-

opment as a continual improvement. An important question then becomes whether individualized representations of social problems contribute to a more general, critical discourse about the pains of this transition in China.

The articles about AIDS, mining accidents and corruption that form the basis for this chapter are constructed around the nodal points 'poverty' and 'economic transition'. Victimized people suffer from the pains of transition: inadequate institutions, an absence of governmental accountability, corrupt health personnel and officials and a fundamental lack of social security. The critical potential of the articles depends upon the way they construct causal chains. For instance, in the article about the *Strange disease*, the spread of HIV and AIDS is positioned in a causal relationship to poverty. Poverty makes people vulnerable, poverty made peasants sell blood, their poverty made them indebted when they sought treatment for their illness, and poverty made their children drop out of school. The lack of education and knowledge about AIDS among the poor people in the countryside makes them avoid agricultural products from the so-called AIDS villages, and people resident there become even more destitute. The outline of a causal relationship between poverty and the misery and suffering of these people would seem to prompt the broader question about the great divide between rich and poor provinces in China, and indirectly calls into question the economic policies that have caused this situation.

When asked to comment on the presence of a structural perspective within 'social news', a journalist explained the positioning of concrete problems in a wider societal context as a sign of modernity. He contrasted this to traditional social news that only describes the immediate

causes of social problems and always emphasises what government officials did to rectify the situation. Modern social news, on the other hand, analyses underlying causes (Interview, Wu Yunlu). Aligning critical perspectives with modernity is a discursive strategy that contributes to legitimizing problem-oriented journalism, but the Chinese critical media discourse continues to offer its criticism in an indirect and cautionary manner, focusing more on concrete cases than their structural causes. If journalists are to abide by the rules of propaganda journalism, representations of problems and conflicts pose a challenge because of the required focus on positive news. However, focusing on the *solution* of a problem has been one way to cross the boundary between positive and negative news. If a crisis has been solved and everybody is happy with the way it was handled, the report primarily reveals a positive aspect of society. Within critical journalism a focus on solutions provides a perspective that can add to the polyphony of a text. In the following section, I explore how the polyphonic expressions in the articles from *Southern Weekend* develop their discussion of sensitive and critical issues, and how they are balanced by other perspectives in order to make the articles appear acceptable within the Chinese media discourse.

### *Mining accidents*

Every year in China thousands of workers are killed in mining accidents. In 2002 activist Han Dongfang of the China Labour Bulletin estimated the number of workers killed to be 10,000 per year (Interview, Han Dongfang). The official number is lower, but the Chinese government recognizes that the lack of security in the mines is a major problem. Several fatal accidents have been reported in the media. Most of the mining acci-



dents take place in small, privately owned mines and they are often blamed on corrupt managers and public officials. The main explanation is that they ignore safety measures and voluntarily expose the miners to an extremely dangerous working environment, just to increase their personal wealth. However, large mining accidents remain a sensitive issue in the open media, and when 81 people were killed in a mine in Nandan, Guangxi province, the municipal government did its best to prevent media from reporting about the accident (He 2004).

The *Southern Weekend* title: *State owned coal mines: difficulties beyond security* does not suggest a focus on accidents, but rather a broader perspective on the general problems of the state-owned coal mines. Nonetheless, the article begins by describing the gas explosion on June 20, 2002 in Chengzihe mine, a state-owned coalmine in Heilongjiang province that killed 115 people. In this article, several critical perspectives are present. One perspective concerns the security problems that caused the accident, another perspective addresses the economic factors that have forced the leadership of the mine to under-invest in security, and yet another perspective explains how the transition from a planned to a market-driven economy have put state-owned coal mines in a position where they have no choice but to increase production and ignore safety regulations. These perspectives all carry a critical potential, but each of them contributes to balancing and softening the critical edge of the other perspectives. This is a discursive advantage, because it opens the possibility that the article may be interpreted in a number of different ways. It has probably also been an advantage in facilitating the investigation of the story. Accidents are sensitive, and as the Nandan accident shows, local authorities often seek to prevent journalists from publishing reports that reveal critical

conditions at the local level. In this case, the journalist's ambition could be framed as a request for information that could contribute to demonstrating that the explanatory factors behind this accident were beyond local control. This way the journalist can present himself as a sympathetic ally, rather than a critical antagonist.

The article states that its objective is to show how problems other than security have contributed to the accident. These problems come as a consequence of the transition from a planned economy to a market-driven economy. The text explains that the Chengzihe mine is one of the enormous work units that were established as part of the planned economy, when the guiding economic principle was that enterprises should serve society. After the transition to the market economy, the costs of running these work units constituted a great impediment in the process of turning heavy industry into profitable enterprises. During the first phase of economic reform, the state retained its responsibility for the industry and provided subsidies that covered its losses. After 1993 the subsidies to the mining industry were cut off, but the price of coal did not rise. The reason was that the three major consumers of coal remained within the planned economy. Electricity producers, the railways and the iron and steel industry were not deregulated so the price of coal remained low, and the coal mines remained unprofitable. The article describes the planned economy as a system that made people passive:

In the era of the planned economy, every time a new pit was established and new workers were recruited, the mine had to consider the problems of the worker's family members and children, since their hukou [residence permit] changed from rural to urban. This policy gave the workers benefits, but it gave the company problems. A large proportion of the workers' family members lived within the area of the coalmine. Previously they had their own

houses, tilled their own land, ate their own food, but after they came to the coalmine, they became the company's burden.

This negative representation of the planned economy is not uncontroversial because it questions central elements of communist ideology that still constitute parts of CCP's political identity (Brady 2008). The paragraph signals that the media's propaganda role has been relaxed, and that the text makes use of the newly won freedom to present a critical reading of the past; however later in the text it eases its critique by bringing it in line with the contemporary hegemonic project of economic reform. This can be interpreted as a very subtle re-constitution of the media's propaganda role: apparently a text may be critical, but the conclusion indicated in the text should still support current CCP policies.

In general, the discourse about mining accidents in China has focused on corrupt managers. The title of this article, "*...difficulties beyond security*" distances it from this discourse, by suggesting another focus. However, the text also calls on the expectations built into this discourse when it begins with a description of the accident in the Chengzihe mine that killed 115 people. The article individualizes this tragedy by conveying how the life of a young woman was ruined after she lost her husband in the explosion. This is in line with the general discourse about mining accidents, and when the article moves on to discuss the leaders and the management of the mine, it continues this conventional approach. It is in this passage that the article moves from the individual and concrete to the more structural aspects of the mining sector's problems. This shift is achieved through the representation of the director of the mine, Zhao Wenlin. He is depicted as an unselfish leader who works eagerly to make safety paramount. The article states that people have great respect for

him, and say that safety was his first priority from day one in his job. Early in the morning on 20 June, after Zhao Wenlin received a message about a fire in the mine, skipped breakfast and hurried off to inspect. He went down into the pit where he was killed in the explosion, together with his workers. This description is central to the narrative, because it distances this particular representation of an accident from others, in that it cannot be blamed on the manager in charge. The Chengzihe manager is not greedy, selfish and ignorant of his workers and their safety. Indirectly, this means that the causes for this accident cannot be explained on this level, since it cannot be blamed on a corrupt, local leadership.

Throughout the article, the voice of the author emphasises the structural perspective of the causes behind the accident, but within the text, the voices of interviewees contribute to blurring this picture, and to indicating that local leadership may still be responsible for the accident. The article introduces an old man in this way:

Sun Lianfen has come to take care of the arrangements for his son's funeral and smokes his self-rolled cigarettes while he grumbles about the conditions of the state-owned coal mine: "there are too many outside contract workers, and too many bosses and the way the bosses use people are haphazard, all kinds of people are allowed to go down in the pit, it is against the regulations".

In the article's narrative this man becomes responsible for introducing the topic of contract workers in the mine. He claims that this caused the accident in the mine. The article follows up on this and presents another voice, an anonymous well-informed person who confirms that among the people who died in the accident almost one-third were contract workers. Stating that the use of contract workers caused an accident in a state-owned mine is a serious accusation, and the article modifies this by in-

roducing other perspectives that further contribute to the polyphony of the article, such as an analysis of other factors that influence safety conditions in the mines. This contributes to the flexibility of the text, because the interviewees and their statements are mediated through the article, but simultaneously retain a responsibility for their own agendas.

The article's structural analysis illustrates how safety and human failure are incomplete as explanatory factors. In spite of its safety conscious leadership the Jixi company never implemented the safety improvements imposed by the State Bureau for Production Safety. Instead, the company felt compelled to increase its output to be able to pay its workers and to keep its deficit in check. This analysis exceeds the limitations of the conventional reports of fatal accidents in China's coal mines, by tracing the causes to macro-economic factors rather than concrete, local mismanagement. The problems of the state-owned mines are depicted as extensive and complex. The article's analysis does not explicitly blame the central state, but it does state that the causes of the problem lie in the transition from a planned economy to a market-driven economy. This argument can be interpreted to the extent that the party-state becomes morally responsible for the accident that killed 115 people, but this accusation is softened through the conclusion of the article. This closes the narrative by stating that mining accidents happen because the industry has *not yet* been adjusted to the market economy. This can be read as an acquittal of state responsibility, because according to neoliberal economic principles, the most important contribution the state can make is to roll back and leave industries to the rule of the market. This article conducts a critical and structural analysis of current social problems. It clearly attaches itself to the hegemonic development discourse in China and singles out the

legacies of the planned economy system as a principal cause of the problems. The article balances different perspectives and is open to contradictory conclusions regarding state responsibility.

### *Corruption*

The article about a corruption case at a tent factory in Qiqihar, Heilongjiang, is interesting: it shows how the involvement of official institutions represents a boundary-limiting discourse on corruption, and the text demonstrates insinuations and hints can be ways of transcending that boundary. The article states that its objective is to tell the story of how a corrupt, female manager of the factory manipulates her surroundings and violates the rights of the workers. This is the major conflict addressed in the article, in itself it is rather uncontroversial, but involvement of party-state institutions and their relation to the media adds to the complexity of the story. One of the involved entities in the story, the Second Office for Light Industry, has accused nine media organizations of defamation. The article moves between a concrete, investigatory discourse and a principal and more abstract discussion of whether or not governmental institutions are entitled to sue somebody for defamation. The risk of being accused of defamation constitutes another boundary in the corruption discourse, and in the critical media discourse generally. In other words, the text takes as its starting point a rather limited corruption case that only involves local government, but it uses this case to discuss a broader question that has decisive influence upon media's ability to engage in investigative and critical reporting.

The explicit target of this article is a female manager, Li Shuqin, and the text attempts to prove that she has been corrupt. She was elected

leader of the tent factory, and the story focuses on her as the main culprit of this corruption story. The report in *Southern Weekend* seems clearly to document that she has abused her position and been very creative and clever in siphoning off funds for herself and her two sons. As manager of the company, Li Shuqin dismantled the factory, bought real estate, acted in her own best interests, and effectively sold out the interests of the workers. The article goes into great detail about the amounts of money that have been taken from different accounts and demonstrates the probability of the involvement of the Second Office for Light Industry. Due to Li Shuqin's position as president of a collective enterprise, her policies have caused a deep-rooted conflict with the workers. They have found themselves bullied, their salaries are in arrears and mismanagement will probably cost them their jobs. Their formal rights as workers in a collective enterprise have been ignored and violated. This inspired protests among the workers, and as a consequence, three of the workers' representatives were murdered. The subsequent investigation by local authorities was superficial and the article indicates that the real culprits are likely to go free.

These are serious accusations, and they are most explicit at the scale of the enterprise, and less direct when they involve local authorities. Metaphorically expressed, it appears as if the narrative applies a zoom lens to magnify the circumstances at the most local level. In the sequences that deal with Li Shuqin, the money she has embezzled and the violence caused by her sons, the focus is close. The sums of money are given in precise figures and the text provides a detailed investigation of the corruption at the tent factory. When the narrative touches upon the involvement of the Second Office for Light Industry, the text maintains a

distance and the pressure of the critical gaze is less aggressive. The employees of this office are nameless, faceless and not exposed in the text.

The text remains at this distance when it describes the authorities' investigation against Li Shuqin. The investigation committee was established after a previous article about the corruption case was published in *Southern Weekend*, and the result of the investigation was published in a report: "About *Southern Weekend's* published piece: 'Worker's vote to recall malfeasant Qiqihar manager instigates three successive murder cases.' A report of the investigation of the problems touched upon in the article." The text seeks to reveal that the conclusions of this investigation report are predisposed and prejudiced. One of the claims in the first article in *Southern Weekend* was that the manager had taken out large refunds for medical expenses, and the investigation report's verdict is that a manager should not do such a thing when the workers are not entitled to such coverage of medical expenses. However, the investigation report continues, the managers at this factory have in general been good leaders and their mistakes do not overshadow their positive qualities. The article's analysis of the investigation report indirectly exposes the connections that the manager of the tent factory has had with the local authorities, as her crimes are excused and smoothed over.

In the article the exposure of the authorities' involvement is carried out in a less detailed and accusing manner than the criticism of the corrupt manager herself. However, it is evident that local authorities are involved in the corruption case through the Second Office for Light Industry and it is equally evident that they are unable to investigate the case in an objective way. This raises more principled questions about the rule of law, but these are not explicit in the text. In relation to defamation,



the article makes a case against the right of government institutions to sue media, but this conflict is less antagonistically and explicitly expressed than the case against the corrupt leader of the tent factory.

## AIDS

In the articles discussed in this chapter, there is a movement between different scales, from the individual and local scale to the national scale. In the article about AIDS in Henan, the local scale is described in detail, while the higher geographical scales are presented in vaguer terms. The first paragraph of the article reads:

From the 1970s until the mid 1990s, due to the limited control by responsible offices and the blood pimps' greed, the phenomenon of illegal collection of blood in the countryside was rampant in the eastern and southern parts of Henan province. This was the direct cause of the outbreak and spread of AIDS that we see now in this area, and some of the places where there was widespread sale of blood have now turned into "AIDS villages".

This introduction places the topic in time and space and provides readers with a twofold explanation for the AIDS epidemic in this part of China, based on the lax control and lack of interference by relevant official departments (*zhuguan bumen*), and the blood pimps' blind greed (*liyu xin*). If this phrase is read as a location of responsibility, it is striking how undefined it is. The vagueness of this first paragraph creates a strong contrast to the detailed descriptions of human misery and suffering that follow later in the text.

The article explicitly blames people working for local Epidemic Prevention stations and the employees at the state blood banks for being blood pimps. They are accused of employing their relatives and friends

and for taking advantage of poor people for whom selling their own blood was their only means of extra income. One of the major culprits, or blood pimps, in Henan was a doctor surnamed Ni. He came from Shangcai County, where the Hygiene Office cleared space so that Ni could work there. This piece of information makes it clear that the local government was involved in the blood business. The readers only get to know the surname of the doctor, which does not fully identify him. The director working for him is anonymous, as are his employed family members. The article's narrative represents a situation in which corruption and abuse of state offices abound, and where there are close connections between the state and criminals, but the accusations of state involvement are made in an ambiguous and anonymous manner. This reflects the boundaries of what Scott (1990) calls the public transcript. Withholding the details of the involvement of the party-state institutions signals an acknowledgement that this is a field of power dominated by the party-state.

However, in an indirect manner, the responsibility of party-state institutions for the explosive nature of the AIDS epidemic in Henan is made clear. Public officials facilitated the work of people who bought blood and infected people with HIV. The trustworthiness of government on the local level is questioned through intimations indicating that governmental information is misleading and false. For instance, a spokesman from the Epidemic Prevention Office is cited as stating that there are 636 HIV-infected people in the province. The article comments that the number is probably the result of adding available data, and the real number is much higher. This claim is substantiated by statements from anonymous insiders admitting that the real number of HIV/AIDS cases is much higher.

This information questions the legitimacy of the public transcript and explicitly states that behind official data, there is a reality that does not correspond to the information the public transcript provides. The narrative portrays the officials that provide the journalists with true information as people who are ridden by guilt and bad conscience, and who try to make up for this by telling a journalist the truth. This further contributes to blacken the local government, because the anonymous sources are portrayed as people who want to do the right thing: speak the truth and help the powerless. When they need to remain anonymous, it is because they would otherwise risk their jobs. The information also positions the journalist as truth-seeking and investigative.

The "*Strange disease*" article on Henan indirectly evokes the party-state's responsibility for the suffering and misery endured by poor peasants who were abused by blood pimps who bought their blood with the help of public officials. There does not appear to be any attempt at mobilization against the responsible officials, and the interviewed people suffering from AIDS appear to be too consumed by their own misery to be able to voice their accusations against the party-state. This is in contrast to the article about the "*Three-year-old AIDS victim*". This narrative is constructed around an explicit conflict between the father of the girl, Wang Weijun, and the local representatives of the party-state. The article starts by describing Wang, saying that he hardly can be recognized anymore, because he has let his hair and beard grow. This symbol of protest makes him stand out, and fellow citizens have noticed him and offered their help. A centre providing free judicial support for women has helped him sue the hospital that conducted the blood transfusion that infected his wife with the HIV virus. In court the director of the hospital stood with

his eyes almost closed from the beginning to the end of the case. The symbolic value of this is clear, namely that the hospital does not acknowledge the scope of the problem, nor its responsibility; and that is why Wang wants his story heard by an “audience higher up”. He wants the state to respond to his grievances and to recognize the scope of the AIDS problem in China. His protest attacks the lack of accountability and shows the limited power of Chinese citizens in relation to the state. His protest is supported by a statement from a leader of the Epidemic Prevention Station. This official admits that due to feeble routines and lack of control of the blood supply, known incidents such as the one that killed Wang’s wife constitute only the tip of the iceberg. The article does not single out any governmental institution or official as the concrete target for Wang’s accusations, but it draws a general picture of the relation between a citizen who seeks rectification and the state. At the centre of this picture is the invisibility of the citizen.

This severe criticism of the local state and the hospital is not allowed to dominate the narrative. The central perspective of this text concerns Wang’s struggle to cope with the prejudice and lack of knowledge which make people shun him and his daughter. It is in relation to this conflict that the article is most outspoken. When the article refers to people’s reactions and responses to this story, it describes readers’ condemnation of local discrimination and their compassion for the little motherless girl. The first line of conflict between Wang and the local state, and the second, between him and the local community, together create a polyphonic expression where it is possible to read the article as a narrative in which Wang’s antagonist is either the ignorant community surrounding him or the local state. If the emphasis is placed on the local community’s dis-

crimination, the article fulfils a propaganda mission, informing people about HIV and AIDS. If the conflict with the local state is positioned at the forefront of the narrative, the critical potential of the article becomes evident. The text can be read as a critique of a state that does not assume responsibility for its mistakes, and that is inaccessible to its citizens and hence illegitimate.

### **Summing up**

*Southern Weekend* has been central to the development of a more critical media discourse in China, and this chapter has analysed articles on social problems that have been printed in this paper under the category of *social news*. The main finding of this analysis is that these texts are polyphonic, ambiguous expressions: on the one hand, they actively relate to the hegemonic mouthpiece discourse, but they can also be critical and investigative through their opposition to the requirements of mouthpiece discourse. The polyphonic features of such newspaper articles offer a discursive advantage in a controlled media environment, because the ambiguity makes possible different interpretations while decreasing the likelihood of sanctions being imposed by the propaganda authorities. The focus on individuals' misery and suffering also contributes to this purpose. The representations of human tragedies on an individual scale imply expectations of compassion and pity on the part of the audience. These emotions are less likely to contribute to political mobilization than anger, and contribute to framing these narratives as social news rather than political criticism. To the extent that these articles forward political critiques, it is in a limited and indirect manner. Nevertheless, this leaves open the possibility that readers may infer that problems at the local level

are related to the central scale of government, and that individual suffering can be traced back to underlying, systemic causes. In this indirect manner the articles hint at the political responsibility behind social problems in Chinese society.

## Chapter seven

### **Conditional autonomy: restrictions and resistance**

There are many contending understandings and interpretations of the changes that have taken place within the Chinese media field. One approach interprets the Chinese media in light of its allegedly transitional character, during its development and diversification away from the mouthpiece role (Lagerkvist 2006). Observers have assumed that China is in a post-propaganda state, and that modern communication technology makes the party-state unable to control information as it did in the past (Lynch 1999). Technology-related optimism combined with economic determinism emphasise the view that the Chinese media and its political context are likely to be liberalized as a consequence of the economic reforms underway since the 1980s. However, recent scholarly contributions to the debate about the Chinese media and its political role have acknowledged the capacity of the Chinese party-state to extend its control into the digital age (Brady 2008, Lagerkvist 2006). Under this interpretation, rather than suggesting the demise of propaganda, the diversification of the Chinese media has provided the party-state with more finely tuned and sophisticated means through which to conduct *thought work*. For instance, the social and current affairs program *Focus* (*Jiaodian Fangtan*) has

been interpreted in this manner (Chan 2002, Zhang 2006). In this program, social problems are addressed, but in a manner that presents the central party-state in a positive light and emphasises its capacity and legitimacy.

This chapter addresses the issue of how the media's conditional autonomy is being restricted, and how journalists are attempting to increase their autonomy. Due to the mouthpiece role ascribed to the media in communist China under Mao, the media's practice was heavily regulated. The relationship between the CCP and the media in that period has been described as command communication, because the media's main role was limited to distribution and propagation of the party line. Brady's (2008) comprehensive work on the current Chinese propaganda system shows how the economic deregulation does not exempt media from this role. Compared to the situation in the 1980s, the party-state today places not less but rather more weight on thought work and propaganda. This renewed emphasis on propaganda delivered by the media has decisive influence on the situation critical journalists confront when they want to extend the range of issues it is possible to discuss in the open media. The discursive and social practices employed by critical journalists are expressions of resistance. Critical journalists defy the authorities' attempts to restrict their work and seek to overcome the limitations this poses on their work. Nevertheless, faced with political control and possible negative sanctions, they have to adjust, and self-regulation becomes a necessary practice in a context of domination. Critical journalism is a field of contention, in which party-state authorities, actors defending economic or personal interests and critical journalists all participate. They all employ power techniques. For instance, through its regulatory practices, the



party-state's authorities seek to utilize limited media criticism for their own purposes, while imposing negative sanctions on journalists who do not stay within its determined bounds. Within this field of contention, the relation between critical journalism and the party-state is characterized by a conditional autonomy, under which journalists seek to work around the limits imposed by the party-state to expand and create new spaces of representation.

### **SELF-REGULATION**

Foucault claims that modernity is characterized by the development of more indirect and efficient ways of disciplining subjects. To him, the 'prison-like' is a defining feature of many central institutions in modern societies. Schools, asylums and prisons all require discipline, and in *Discipline and punish* (1995) Foucault provides a detailed description of Bentham's *Panopticon*. This is an architectonic construction consisting of a large circular building divided into cells, with an observation tower in the middle. From the tower, a guard would have unimpaired lines of sight to the cells, while being shielded from view by some ingenious illumination system. The Panopticon reverses the logic of the dungeon: instead of darkness and invisibility, there is light and the constant possibility of being watched. The combination of strict regulation and the ever-present possibility of being watched has contained political opposition in China, much as Foucault imagined that the Panopticon would facilitate disciplinary power. Interpreted in this light, the increased emphasis on propaganda and thought work in China in the post-1989 period may have strengthened the party-state's influence over the formation of public opinion (Brady 2008). Foucault's view of the close connection between

observation and discipline has been criticized by Alford (2000). He points out that the Panopticon remained an unrealized idea because Bentham was never able to convince British authorities that they should build this prison. Contrary to Foucault's belief, modern prisons enforce discipline through means which are nearly the opposite of those embodied in the Panopticon. Current high security prisons are characterized by a lack of observation rather than constant surveillance, for as long as they control the entrances and exits, observation is superfluous: "Real power means not having to look in the first place. The need to look is itself a sign of the limits of power" (Alford 2000:129). This is relevant to the Chinese context, because if Alford is right, it indicates that a state that has extensive systems for controlling the media is incapable of dictating media content.

In the Mao era, when the Chinese media was entirely integrated in the party-state and ideological control determined media content, the party-state's control over journalists and their work was direct and immediate. During the economic reform period, increased financial freedom and decreased emphasis on ideology have given media institutions more leeway in their work. This has empowered the media, and relations where there is power on both sides are more likely to be regulated through panoptic power techniques (Alford 2000). Chinese journalists and editors know that their work is being controlled, they know that they are being watched, and they know the range of potential sanctions; as in the Panopticon, self-regulation is a logical response to observation and control. However, what the panoptic metaphor does not capture is the dynamics in the relationship between the authority and the subjects of control.

Self-regulation can be interpreted as a consequence of the internalization of control, analytically almost akin to false consciousness. In this sense, self-regulation among Chinese journalists simply reflects the power of the party-state. However, self-regulation can also be understood as a conscious strategy that enables journalists to continue their work within the context of an authoritarian one-party state. Even the most severe oppression will be met by resistance (Scott 1990). When open, political mobilization is impossible, the field of *infrapolitics* becomes the site of conflict. Infrapolitics consist of acts and discourses that convey opposition without being openly detected as such. This perspective on domination and resistance is important for this analysis of the conditional autonomy of critical journalists. The party-state's ambition to dominate and control the media field in China does not mean that it succeeds in eliminating journalists' ambition to reverse the top-down nature of Chinese media and their wish to serve the people rather than the party.

In interviews with critical journalists in China, self-regulation was often described as a "gut-feeling". When I asked Wu Yunlu how he evaluates news and issues regarding what can and cannot be published, he answered:

That's easy, it's based on experience. We have accumulated news, we know what we can and cannot say. The balance between the market and the party is a result of a long process, it is very difficult to explain clearly to you.

This response is emblematic for the interviewees' representations of the ability to evaluate news according to relevant boundaries as a form of initiated knowledge, a gut feeling that is based on experience. They depict self-regulation as an active strategy that is necessary in order to operate as a critical journalist in China. Several of the interviewees present their abil-

ity to foretell the consequences of reporting a particular issue as central to their professionalism as journalists. When I asked Xu Feng whether he had experienced any negative reactions upon his work as a critical journalist, he seemed proud and confident when he replied that he never had encountered any negative sanctions based on reports he had published. He had experienced authorities' interference in his work many times, but his published work had never been sanctioned. To him, this confirmed his ability to read the system at any given moment; naturally, this would make him a popular employee given that his work is interesting, but he knows where the limits run. To Zhao Sanpeng, the choice to write or not to write about something is based on what he calls the "political criterion". He finds that his deep knowledge of Chinese politics provides him with shelter, because he is able to foresee the changing boundaries within the Chinese news discourse. This is also a form of initiated knowledge that is not readily available, but based on extensive experience.

Zhao's reason for emphasising the political as the decisive criterion for his evaluation of news is probably that journalists regulate their own professional behaviour according to the taboo of critical political discourse: "But one thing is that we remind ourselves is...that when there are political issues, try to stay away" (interview, Shi Youli). The 'political' is a fleeting signifier, its meaning is changeable, but it always signals the presence of taboos for investigative and critical journalism. That is expressed when Xu Feng uses the metaphor of the "high voltage wire of politics". When the political is construed as a taboo, it remains within the domain of propaganda journalism.

For critical journalists the security and protection efficient self-regulation offers is weighed against the competitive advantage of pub-

lishing interesting news. The journalists describe media competition as fierce, and “if you do not publish it, somebody else will, if you don’t tell, somebody else will” (interview, He Rigao). On the other hand, sensitive issues involve risk: the risk of losing one’s job. He Rigao says that “if you want to disclose domestic problems it is very likely that you might end up shot and killed”. Self-regulation is necessary because transgression is dangerous.

Another dimension of self-regulation is the way censorship is built into news organizations through hierarchical structures and the division of responsibility. Editors are held responsible for the work of their subordinates, and the editor-in-chief is responsible for the product in general. The media hierarchy has layers of control: courageous journalists are contained by a careful editor, and an editor-in-chief can restrain the whole organization (interview, He Rigao). At the time I interviewed He Rigao, he worked in TV and he felt that the hierarchical structure of news organizations reinforces a tendency to prioritize safety above news value and competitive interest. He experienced the vested power of editors as a severe hindrance in his work. What happened at his workplace in the wake of September 11 illustrates the relation between journalists and editors. He Rigao’s work focuses on economy and finance, and when the news about the Twin Towers reached him and his colleagues, they assumed that since this was foreign news, they would be able to report it. They incorporated the news into the program they were making, and focused in particular on the accident and on its potential economic consequences, especially for civil aviation and tourism. As it turned out, He and his colleagues had misread the situation, and their leaders wanted to await the instructions from the Propaganda Department. The editors

wanted to be on the safe side, and the breaking news of this incident was delayed for several hours due to their decision. Zhao Sanpeng related a similar experience, when he was working on a story about a representative to the People's Congress who had been illegally detained. It was his newspaper that had assigned him to write about the case, but in the end they did not have the courage to print it. The journalist's strategy was then to look for a different outlet for publishing the story, on the theory that other mainland newspapers might be more courageous, and if they refused, he would publish it in Hong Kong. In general, editors' risk aversion means that censorship becomes integrated into the news organizations they run.

Shi Youli sees the hierarchical structure of news organizations from another point of view, and emphasises the protection the editors offer, rather than the containment and censorship. In her workplace, journalists often discuss their ideas for a story with their editor, who gives advice, encouraging certain angles and warning against others. Shi Youli sees her editor as open-minded and feels that she provides valuable advice. Whenever she feels unsure about something, she will talk to her. Her editor ensures that the stories they publish remain within the boundaries of the accepted and in Shi's experience, the relationship to her editor reduces the pressure on the journalists: "And that way, when our stories are out, we won't get too much trouble". This journalist works within a media organization that is subject to strict control, but within her department, journalists enjoy a relatively high level of freedom. This probably influences her perception of her situation as less constrained.

The importance of the editor-in-chief is also reflected in journalists' accounts of factors that enable critical journalism in China. The backing of a

strong editor-in-chief is understood to be a prerequisite for investigative journalism; without such an individual's support investigative journalism is both too dangerous and futile, since it will not be published. That was why several of *Southern Weekend's* journalists left the paper in protest in 2002, as a response to the policies of the new editor-in-chief and his allies. The former editors were replaced as part of the negative sanctions against the paper, and the journalists interviewed described the new ones as spineless cowards supported by the propaganda authorities (Interview, Xu Feng, Ai Hongwen).

These editors decided they wanted to pay more attention to political news (interview, Wu Yunlu). The newspaper had been through several rounds of criticism and sanctions from the authorities, and a likely interpretation is that this increased emphasis on political news was part of the paper's rectification process with the party-state authorities. As the 'political' is construed as a taboo for investigative journalism in China, the publishing of more political news would strengthen the mouthpiece role of the paper and restrict its watchdog function. It was therefore surprising when one of the experienced staff members from the paper explained that this turn of the paper was unrelated to rectification, and was instead simply because politics were important; as a paper with national distribution, it should pay more attention to politics. The same journalist added that the strong focus on social news had brought the paper into trouble, but that the new focus on political news seemed to bring on even more difficulties (Interview, Wu Yunlu). This view was in contrast to those of several of the journalists who by then had left the paper after a conflict with the new leaders over the future course of the paper. They felt that *Southern Weekend* had caved in, that it had lost the attitude that made it so special.

*Southern Weekend's* turn towards more political news and less critical journalism can be read in yet another way. In the end, it might be the only way for the paper to continue to publish and avoid being closed down. Another paper in the *Southern* group, the *Metropolitan News* (*Nanfang Dushibao*) made a similar choice after several instances of negative sanctions, the most serious of which was the detention of three of its editors for several months. The editor-in-chief then coined the formulation *power is in the mainstream* (Wang 2006). The most immediate concern for the editor-in-chief was to continue to produce a paper that brings in lots of money for its corporate owners and secures the work of his employees. After all the difficulties the paper had been through, the power to continue was directly linked to a more mainstream positioning of the paper. Wu Yunlu says the same about *Southern Weekend*: "it should change from being a marginal paper to become a mainstream paper". A dimension of this kind of self-regulation is that by continuing to exist, and by connecting the newspapers' past with the future, these papers normalize their existence within Chinese news discourse. There is power in establishing something as mainstream, and in continuing despite authorities' interferences.

## **POLITICAL CONTROL AND SANCTIONS**

Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are protected under the Chinese constitution, which was adopted in 1982. Whether or not there is freedom of expression in China was a question none of the journalists I interviewed brought up in our discussions. Instead they compared the present to the past, and introduced me to a context that provided them with a larger degree of freedom to conduct 'real' journalism, in contrast



to previous propaganda practices. Some even claimed that they could investigate and publish nearly anything they wanted to (Interview, Feng Lihong). Utterances as this reflect the heterogeneity of the group of interviewees. In spite of their common engagement with investigative news, their choice of topics and angles expose them to different degrees of regulation. In general, critical journalists appear to internalize political limits to freedom of expression in much the same way as journalists in liberal democracies internalize the limits imposed by the market. Most of my informants made it clear that they did not accept the limitations to freedom of expression as legitimate, but that there are nevertheless boundaries they have to take into consideration in their work.

In contrast to the Soviet propaganda system, media regulation in China has not been conducted through extensive pre-publication censorship (Brady 2008, Wu 1994). There are some exceptions: for instance, the producers of CCTV's program *Focus* have to seek permission for every program, because they expose local problems and reach out to such a large audience (Chan 2002). Political regulation within the Chinese media field has been implemented through administrative practices, political managerialism and ad hoc notices. These regulatory practices are embedded within the Propaganda *xitong*, and their evolution reflects shifts in the power relations between different factions within the CCP leadership, as well as variations in the emphasis placed upon propaganda and thought work over time. It is not that strange that the interviewed journalists refer to their "gut feeling", when asked about how they manage to keep within the limits of the politically acceptable. The regulations guiding Chinese media practice are complex, volatile, and the use of direc-

tives and ad hoc interventions means that they can be unpredictable (Fu and Cullen 1996).

During the 1980s, the need for a media law was a central political question. The political leadership of the decade concentrated their efforts on economic reform (Brady 2008). Premier Zhao Ziyang favoured strengthening the watchdog role of the media and political control of the media thereby decreased. Zhao advocated a media law that would make journalists less vulnerable to arbitrary restrictions. This process came to an end with the crackdown on the Tiananmen demonstrations in June 1989 (Zhao 1998). Zhao Ziyang was forced to resign and Chinese journalists faced new and stricter regulations that reflected the renewed power of the Propaganda *xitong* (Brady 2008).

The central Propaganda Department outlines policies regarding the mass media, such as the priority of different kinds of news reports. Some of these guidelines are printed in an internal paper, the *Internal Report* (*Neibu Tongxin*) which is distributed to provincial and local propaganda departments and to the newspapers. Here, policies and regulations according to current topics are presented, and politically correct vocabulary is explained; the paper also publishes warnings and speeches by central propaganda officials (Brady 2008). In addition to the hierarchy of propaganda departments, the government has a central agency of media and publications and provincial bureaus of media and publications. Their task is to maintain day-to-day newspaper control (Fu and Cullen 1996). However, these government offices are also part of the Propaganda *xitong*, and in practice they are subject to the authority of the central propaganda department (Brady 2008). Probably as a consequence of the diversification and extension of the media sector, propaganda authorities es-

established groups of retired propaganda officials, journalists and editors to carry out post-publication control of local papers (Brady 2008). This way the propaganda authorities will be informed if a paper goes too far, and can impose negative sanctions.

The laws that journalists and other media workers must abide by are directed towards society in general and cover areas such as national security and state secrets. The *Protection of state secrets provisional regulations* from 1951 included a broad conception of state secrets involving military and banking secrets as well as meteorological forecasts and all state affairs not yet made public. Since then the scope of the definition of state secrets has been narrowed, but any matter that might affect the security and interests of the state, its integrity, national unity and social stability is still regarded as a state secret (Fu and Cullen 1996). The consequence is that the list of state secrets is incomplete, because any topic might be a state secret if its disclosure leads to consequences such as social instability. State units at different levels classify state secrets within their own units, and each central state organ has its own rules on the classification of secrets. Within the judiciary, it is the Supreme People's Court that is entitled to classify information. The most important secrets within this area will be drawn from information about cases which have serious consequences for social stability, national unity, race relations, and foreign relations. Statistics on sensitive topics, such as the use of death penalty, constitute a state secret in this sense. Several dissidents have been accused of revealing state secrets because the information they revealed could ostensibly have this effect (Fu and Cullen 1996).

China has strict rules against pornographic materials, and these rules also extend to publications which are seen as partially obscene and inde-

cent. These involve elements such as “explicit portrayal of degenerate behaviour, which could cause juvenile imitation”, and “explicit portrayal of sexual diseases, such as syphilis, gonorrhoea and AIDS which ordinary people find disgusting” (Fu and Cullen 1996:172). Regarding pornography, Brady (2008) explains that there has been a movement among propaganda authorities towards a greater tolerance for “soft” porn. Nevertheless, protecting the public from pornography remains a central explanation for the need to control and regulate the media, in particular the internet.

Perhaps the primary judicial instrument for controlling Chinese media has been the law on defamation (Fu and Cullen 1996). Defamation occurs when “ A says to another or to others, something about B which is false and derogatory and which does harm to B’s reputation” (Fu and Cullen 1996:183). Defamation can be a crime, but generally it is a civil wrong and is redressed through civil law suits. In China, the personal right to reputation acquired protection through the Civil Law General Principles in 1986. This law was followed by a “ suing reporters fever”, where among others many high ranking officials, policemen and representatives to the People’s Congress accused journalists and editors of defamation. Defamation law is better suited for day-to-day control of the media than are the other formal restrictions. State secrets and national security are more limited in their application, the rules are vague, and they do not protect against criticism of the CCP and government officials being uttered.

As the direct political control of Chinese media has gradually weakened, the use of civil law of defamation offers an indirect method of control. According to He (2004), Jiang Zemin issued a secret directive in Shanghai in 1994 which encouraged authorities to handle political ques-

tions through non-political means. Rather than accusing people on the grounds of crimes of conscience, the party-state should bring its enemies into disrepute through accusations of visiting prostitutes, fraud or corruption. In private lawsuits, the role of the party-state is further concealed, because the judiciary appears as a neutral third party in the conflict between a plaintiff and the media. The increased financial independence of Chinese media makes defamation a particularly apt tool for controlling journalists, because lost defamation suits threaten the financial viability of commercial media outlets. When this risk makes media outlets careful about exposing officials and other people in a negative way, it also means that the cost of censorship is transferred from the party-state to the parties who might be involved in a potential defamation suit.

#### LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND MEDIA CONTROL

State ownership and control of personnel has probably been the most important means to ensure the mouthpiece role of Chinese media. After the revolution in 1949, private ownership of the media was gradually reduced until it was abolished in 1957 (Fu and Cullen 1996). In the Mao era this control was almost absolute. There was no labour market, the party-state appointed journalists to their work unit and the media outlets had no alternative sources of funding than state subsidies. The party-state's financial control over the media has been weakened during the economic reform period, and journalists are hired and fired, but the party-state's formal ownership of some media outlets remains an important source of control. The organization of ownership is decentralized and authorities on every level of the party-state can control their own media. This ownership structure gives local authorities power to imple-

ment policies within their own jurisdiction, and contributes to great variations in the levels of media control (Interview, Wu Yunlu, Xu Feng, Feng Junjiu).

*Southern Weekend* is owned by the Guangdong Provincial Party Committee, which has been known to give the media more freedom to publish critical and investigative journalism than other provincial authorities. To avoid provoking the Guangdong authorities and risk having the relatively greater freedom of the media withdrawn, *Southern Weekend* has focused less on cases that have involved the responsibility of Guangdong authorities, and more on other provinces. According to journalists who have worked for the paper, they have raised important social issues in Guangdong too, but within the *Southern* group, this has perhaps particularly been the task of the *Metropolitan News (Nanfang Dushibao)* (Interview, Fan Yihong).

One case from *Southern Weekend* that illustrates geographic power relations in the media is the *Zhang Jun* story that figured in the media in 2001. Zhang Jun led a criminal gang operating in Guangdong province, had conducted armed raids against banks and shops and was also accused of murder. Within the mouthpiece role of the media, such stories are reported in a uniform way, by morally condemning the criminal acts and emphasising the action taken by the party-state to put an end to the activities of the criminals. *Southern Weekend* took another approach to the Zhang Jun case and went to his home village in Anhui to research his background. The story became an investigation of how this intelligent man became a hardened criminal. The journalists situated the case of Zhang Jun in a more general context of problems in China's rural areas and the discrimination against Chinese peasants in the cities (interview,

Wu Yunlu). This story infuriated the leader of Anhui's provincial party committee, who claimed that the *Zhang Jun* case was only about a rotten criminal and had nothing to do with social problems. But the Anhui authorities could not intervene directly: the paper fell within the jurisdiction of Guangdong province and the current relationship between the provinces does not allow one province to enforce its will upon another province, although they can use their influence to negotiate as equals. The Anhui authorities therefore adopted a twofold strategy. They approached representatives of the Guangdong Party Committee and argued their case. They also contacted central party authorities and claimed that the Guangdong media had inflicted harm on the whole party. The Anhui representatives argued that reports such as *Southern Weekend's* articles about the social background of Zhang Jun satirized and made fun of the party and constituted a serious threat to the CCP and its ability to govern.

As a result of the pressure from central authorities and Anhui provincial authorities, the Guangdong Province Party Committee had no choice but to carry out a supervision of *Nanfang Zhoumo* (interview, Wu Yunlu). The first stage in the Provincial Party Committee's supervision was to remove the party's editor-in-chief, Jiang Yiping; she was transferred to another paper within the *Southern* group (He 2004). The propaganda authorities' argument was that it was necessary to replace her with a person better able to serve the party. The second stage of the supervision was to discipline the journalist and the editor behind the *Zhang Jun* story; both were dismissed. This piece of investigative journalism was interpreted as posing threat to the CCP's ability to govern because it suggested that the party and its policies were to blame for criminal behaviour of the kind committed by Zhang Jun (Interview, Wu Yunlu). According to Wu

Yunlu, other articles with a similar critical content had been passed earlier, but this time the reaction was so strong that sanctions were imposed.

The process which followed the Zhang Jun case reflects the arbitrary nature of sanctions against the Chinese media. Decentralized control over the media contributes to this phenomenon, because in most cases it is up to local authorities to decide whether or not journalists will be allowed access to and be permitted to report on a local issue. After accidents, or other major incidents, the local government will usually establish a group that handles information and other aspects relating to the incident. This often results in a news blockade; journalists are refused access and any documentation, such as their film, is confiscated (interview, Fan Yihong). The local authorities' decisions are then conveyed to news media by the Propaganda Department, which calls or sends a fax to the provincial party committees; these in turn contact the newspapers within their jurisdiction. They either call the editor-in-chief and *ask* the paper not to publish the report, or they call the paper and *tell* the editor that the report may not be published. Xu Feng explained that when he hears about accidents or other major incidents, he and other journalists will go intending to investigate, conduct interviews and write their reports. When local government authorities decide to close a case, he normally receives a phone call where a voice asks: "Have you left yet? If so, come back, don't write a single word". From the perspective of the party-state and its propaganda authorities, phone calls have the advantage of not leaving a paper trail. The suppression of free speech this control involves is difficult to document extensively, because it is ad hoc and orally transmitted (Brady 2008).



Local authorities can deny the media's access to a case by refusing to allow them to write anything about it, but a widespread alternative is to control the media by restricting relevant sources. This also has the advantage of making the political control of media more indirect. Xu Feng explained that this had happened when he was investigating a case where several people had been poisoned and killed in Nanjing. The local investigation group withheld information and would not even reveal the number of people who had been killed. The same strategy is employed by local authorities all over the country (He 2004). Xu Feng considers that this strategy is pointless, explaining that the propaganda bureaucrats still believe that if they block the news sources, people will believe what the Propaganda Department is saying.

This raises the more general question of whether or not propaganda's function to any extent depends upon its believability. Scott (1990) argues that propaganda can be an empty spectacle, such as a parade without spectators, because propaganda's value is connected to the power it demonstrates, and not to its ability to convince people. In cases where the Chinese party-state distributes false and absurd information, it demonstrates the state's power to suppress opposition and alternative voices. During the last decade, the propaganda authorities' have aimed to strengthen the believability of propaganda. For instance, they have warned against publishing exaggerated reports about model workers, depicting them as people who will not even go home to sleep, because this will make it hard for people to follow their example in real life (Brady 2008). This underscores Scott's point that propaganda's principal value is independent of its ability to convince people.

## SANCTIONS

The sanctions against Chinese journalists range from public apologies in the form of self-criticism, replacements or dismissal to court cases and prison. A self-criticism is a public apology that restores the norms of domination. By making a public apology, the subordinate admits the offence; the authority's judgement is also publicly accepted (Scott 1990). As in the relation between propaganda and believability, public apologies do not depend on sincerity to be effective, because their importance lies in how they represent the power holder. Power relations can accommodate a high level of resistance as long as it is not publicly displayed (Scott 1990). Common forms of public apology within the Chinese media field are the replacement of journalists and editors and the publication of a self-criticism. For instance, *China Youth Daily* had to publish a self-criticism after it had reported on the flood in Jiujiang and how the dykes were in danger in 1998, refusing to follow the authorities' decision not to publish anything about the dykes. One of their journalists subsequently used this example when he gave a public speech at the elite Qinghua University in Beijing. He had been invited to talk about how to be a good journalist, and he chose this example in spite of the reaction it had evoked from the authorities. This shows that the self-criticism was an act of *pretended* subordination. The journalist's resistance to the political restriction of news media continued when he chose to display his lack of repentance in front of the Qinghua students.

One experienced editor said that the most dangerous cases are the ones involving children of high officials. The party-state's sanctions can be triggered on the basis of the hurt feelings and personal interest of powerful people, and not because any rules were broken. There is no

doubt that the risk of state sanctions has a disciplinary effect on journalists and editors. Losing one's job is a serious problem, and it is difficult to find a willing employer for a journalist who has caused serious trouble. Verdicts and imprisonment are even more serious, and the threat of state sanctions ensures that journalists remain attentive to and interpret the signals as to what they may or may not write. What makes it particularly difficult for Chinese journalists to manoeuvre is that the imposition of sanctions often depends more upon *who* is involved than what the case is about. Whether anyone powerful is involved, or the issue includes someone with a relationship to the central government, is decisive in determining whether or not material about an issue can be published (Interview, Shi Youli). Critical journalists in China try to protect themselves against this risk by investigating the personal networks of people involved every case they research, trying to predict the reactions of the involved parties in order to avoid sanctions. As mentioned in chapter 5, critical journalists see their ability to predict the boundaries of what can and cannot be written as an aspect of their professional qualifications. This was reflected when Wu Yunlu discussed the Zhang Jun story. He did not emphasise that the Anhui authorities had reacted in an unexpected way. Instead, he underscored that the propaganda authorities had no choice but to react the way they did, given the nature of the protests from the Anhui provincial authorities. In other words, Wu considers the sanctions to be a kind of logical necessity. This does not imply that he accepts the reaction as legitimate, but he construes the ability to interpret and foresee state sanctions as part of his professional skills as a journalist, even in hindsight.

Lack of judicial protection also makes the media vulnerable to reactions from private actors. In the day-to-day work of the Chinese media, pressure and threats from private actors are perceived as presenting a larger obstacle to the work of journalists than the party-state's interventions (Interviews, Gao Jing, Fan Yihong, Ai Hongwen). State interventions and sanctions can be arbitrary and unforeseen, and the aggregate numbers of sanctions such as imprisonments and court cases imposed on Chinese journalists reflect the difficult working conditions for Chinese journalists.

Nevertheless, party-state sanctions are in general never life-threatening, and investigative journalists rarely find that their watchdog role in relation to the state exposes them to physical danger. Much investigative reporting, however, targets topics such as economic mismanagement, corruption, shady deals in the stock market and quackery, and involves private actors. Information that protects costumers against fake products and services has been an important arena for the development of critical journalism in China. In 1995-96, when the disclosure of corruption cases and other examples of investigative journalism was a new phenomenon, private actors posed a relatively greater threat to *Southern Weekend* journalists (interview, Fan Yihong). One example was a case in which journalists from *Southern Weekend* investigated a story involving a group of immigrants from Shanxi province pretending to be doctors treating venereal diseases in Guangdong. They had a profitable business and were protected through connections with people in the Department of Commerce and Trade. Cases such as this, where media attention will deprive people of their illegal income, are dangerous for journalists. The endeavours undertaken by private actors to prevent journalists and edi-

tors from publishing their reports take different forms, ranging from bribes to violent threats. The journalists who investigated this case received threatening phone calls from people instructing them to drop the case or else (Interview, Fan Yihong).

Ai Hongwen has worked a lot with mafia-related problems, and has handled many difficult situations. In one case he received several phone calls where funeral music was played in the other end of the line, which he perceived as death threats. He was also approached by mafia representatives asking him to discontinue his investigations. In one case his enemies tried to make it look as if he had received money from them, so that they could question his integrity and reduce the impact of his work. Another journalist, Gao Jing, described an investigation in the countryside where she was on her own and the person she wanted to interview kept delaying their appointment; when night fell she felt threatened and managed to return to the city. Many *Southern Weekend* journalists have had such experiences. One journalist was chased by a car while she was investigating a case in Xi'an. She called the paper and they made colleagues in Xi'an help her. Others have received threats against their families while they have been investigating cases in other locations. In these situations, support from the newspaper has been extremely important. Editors have mobilized colleagues, called the police and defended the journalists against false accusations (Interview, Fan Yihong). In this unstable environment, the relationship between a paper's editor-in-chief and its journalists becomes particularly important (interview, Ai Hongwen).

The widespread phenomenon of paid journalism in China means that many private actors assume that journalists can be paid to stop an investigation. Offering money to ensure the cooperation of journalists is a

common reaction from people who think their interests will be threatened by media attention. If a journalist refuses bribes and continues to work, another strategy employed is make it seem as if huge bribes have been accepted (Interview, Ai Hongwen). The meaning of taking bribes is not clearly defined within Chinese media discourse. Paid journalism appears as a normal practice. As a result, for journalists who do not accept bribes and seek to establish an independent stance, this becomes a defining feature of their professional identity. For independent-minded journalists, accepting bribes is perceived as something that is incompatible with objectivity and professional journalism. However, critical journalists argue that there are cases in which it is impossible to avoid bribes. *Southern Weekend* has tried to resolve this dilemma by requiring that journalists hand over any bribes received to the paper, in order to ensure the independent position of the paper's journalists (Interview, Fan Yihong).

Critical journalists in China risk negative sanctions from party-state authorities if their work is perceived as a threat to powerful people. Critical journalists also lack protection from the party-state in relation to private actors. They interpret their own vulnerability in relation to private actors as a consequence of a corrupt and clientelist system. Judges, police, the procuratorate as well as political leaders accept attacks on journalists because their personal interests are at stake (interview, Ai Hongwen).

### **POWER TECHNIQUES: DOMINATION AND RESISTANCE**

Critical journalists in China are subject to a substantial number of limitations in their work. They mediate information within an authoritarian context in which the hegemon's conception of the media is as a mouthpiece for the CCP. This section of the chapter focuses on the power tech-

niques employed by party-state authorities and the strategies of resistance with which critical journalists respond. After the crackdown on the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989 and the intra-CCP power struggle which ensued, the winning faction within the CCP leadership argued that one of the main causes for the uprising was that propaganda work had been neglected in the period of economic reform (Brady 2008). The leadership realized that they had to develop their propaganda and thought work to accommodate a new situation characterized by modern information technology and an increasingly diversified media, and changed the emphasis from a narrow mouthpiece (*houshe*) conception of the media to one focusing on agenda-setting (*yulun daoxiang*). However, the CCP leadership never questioned the principle that media should serve the interests of the party-state (Chan 2002). Agenda-setting differs from previous propaganda paradigms since it allows for more than one voice. It reflects a change in the party-state's ambition, from aiming at controlling *what* people think, to seeking to influence what people think *about*. Agenda-setting represents an active approach to propaganda, inspired and influenced by Western PR methods and debates (Brady 2008).

Agenda-setting makes space for public supervision (*yulun jiandu*) as long as journalists only expose limited problems, for instance problems at the local levels of Chinese society that can be addressed and rectified. When these problems are dealt with, this contributes to an image of the central party-state as being responsive and responsible. Through public supervision, local cadres are held responsible for their mistakes, and social problems are linked to local mismanagement rather than fundamental policy failures or a lack of legitimacy on the part of the CCP. In other words, the development of more critical journalism can be traced to a

change in party-state policies. This raises the question of whether critical journalism only is a way for people and journalists to let out steam, to express anger and criticism on a very limited scale. When my conclusion suggests otherwise, it is because of the potential for transgression involved in critical journalism. It is clear that it is journalists and not the government who have pushed out the boundaries of critical journalism. The party-state seeks to employ investigative and problem-oriented journalism for its own purposes, but this ambition does not guarantee the loyalty of journalists. When Scott (1990) analyzes the use of hydraulic metaphors, he argues that they underestimate the agency of the subordinate. In the case of the Chinese media, a limited, autonomous space might allow for valuable practice, and indeed the increase in critical journalism in China in the latter half of the 1990s trained journalists in investigative methods. These methods can easily be transferred to a different level. Another important aspect of the practice of critical journalists is their willingness to “toe the line”. They do not passively accept the boundaries established by the authorities. By toeing the line, they try to go as far as is possible without incurring sanctions. However, this does not make it impossible for critical journalism that stays within the accepted limits to serve the interests of the party-state. The following discussion explores the character of the relevant limitations, and what critical journalists do to expand their spaces of representation.

#### LIMITS TO INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

When former president Jiang Zemin visited the People’s Daily (*Renmin Ribao*) in 1996 he exclaimed that: “Correct agenda-setting will benefit the people, while incorrect agenda-setting will bring disaster” (quoted in



(Chan 2002:48). This statement illustrates how central principles defining the mouthpiece role of media are maintained within the policy of agenda-setting. First, by saying that correct agenda-setting will benefit the people, Jiang upholds the notion that the relationship between the party and the people is harmonious and does not contain conflicts of interest. Second, his statement continues the instrumental understanding of media's role. Third, his statement upholds the discursive practice of associating freedom of speech with chaos and disaster. Correct agenda-setting and public supervision are new means for achieving the same goal as previous propaganda journalism, namely to contribute to positive image construction for the party-state (Chan 2002). This is possible as long as journalism contributes to construing the party-state as responsive; in order to have this effect, the negative issues which the media discusses have to be limited to problems that can be rectified. This was emphasised by Yang Weiguang, the president of CCTV (China's national TV station) at a seminar about the current affairs program *Focus* (*Jiaodian Fangtan*). He said that:

No matter whether a topic is a positive or negative one...programs must give people encouragement, confidence, and strength to march forward, rather than a feeling of hopelessness. ... Problems that the government has paid attention to or is trying to solve may be dealt with.... Don't deal with problems that are essentially unsolvable. Don't deal with those problems for which there are definitely no immediate solutions.

(Zhao 1998:120)

Journalists may or may not support these considerations, but they will have to relate to them in their own work. While it is less limited and ideological than old-fashioned propaganda journalism, agenda-setting continues to regulate the timing, scope and content of critical reports. These

discursive boundaries express that the instrumental evaluation of the potential social effect of news is valued above what Chinese journalists call their readers' *right to know*.

Timing is a key factor within agenda-setting, and freedom of expression within the Chinese media fluctuates in relation to central social and political events and public holidays. The spring festival, the holiday week around May 1 and the national day on October 1 are seasons of the year when the media has to be warier than at other times. A student taking her master's degree in journalism explained to me that one year while she was growing up, an environmental disaster had happened somewhere in China during the New Year's celebration, but news was first disclosed a week later. She saw this as quite natural, because such sad news would have spoiled the celebration for the people (pers. comm. Shanghai 2001). Her account draws on a discourse that Lee (1990:7) calls a "Confucian ethos in Leninist disguise". Within the Confucian tradition the relationship between rulers and their subjects is likened to that of a family. The rulers are best qualified to represent and take care of their subjects' interests. Both the family and society in general are conceived of as power-free spaces where there are no deep conflicts of interest. The image of benevolent rulers with a heavenly mandate has been recast in CCP rhetoric, and it is this relation between rulers and subjects that is implicitly referred to when the media is silenced during holidays. Other sensitive times of the year include the anniversary for the crackdown of the democracy movement on June 4<sup>th</sup> and major political events such as the annual National People's Congress assemblies and Party congresses. Party-state authorities see the periods leading up to political events or national holidays as times during which the media should convey optimistic attitudes and

national pride. This enhances the risks arising in connection with the critical exposure of social problems, and presupposes increased sensitivity to the directives given by propaganda authorities. Some of the journalists I wanted to interview about their critical and investigative work explicitly asked me to postpone our appointments until after the completion of the 16<sup>th</sup> party congress in November 2002. For several weeks before the congress, restrictions would be intensified and talking to foreigners could cause difficulties. At that point *Southern Weekend* had recently been subjected to criticism, and journalists in the *Southern* group were probably more wary of crossing the line than others. Other journalists and editors I interviewed did not understand why such precautions would be necessary. This difference between journalists reveals that they perceive restrictions in different ways; their conception of their own freedom to act depends on what they want to do.

The injunction to avoid problems that are not easily solved gives an indication of the scale-dimension of agenda-setting (Zhao 1998). Scale is relevant to the restriction of critical journalism in two senses: the first is the scale at which the incident or problem is located, and the second is the scale at which the news-media is located. Regarding the scale of news, the most important restriction is the one that protects the central level of the party-state against unauthorized or negative exposure. Every piece of information that might threaten the legitimacy of CCP rule is taboo, and this includes ridicule in the form of cartoons and jokes. Officials at the local levels are not protected in the same way, since their misdeeds can be explained as individual failures rather than systemic weaknesses. The media's exposure of local and limited problems gives the central level of the state the possibility to intervene, rectify and hence to

appear as responsive and just. This illustrates how agenda-setting can be image-building since the lack of media criticism against the central levels of the state conveys an image of a well-functioning system. Differences in the reputation of the top leadership and local officials have also been a feature of other authoritarian systems. In late nineteenth-century Russia, there was a myth that the tsar had freed his loyal servants of serfdom, but that unfaithful officials deceived him and prevented the implementation of the decree (Scott 1990). Exposure of local problems may contribute to strengthening the image of the central level of the party-state as untarnished and legitimate and as a representative of the justice of which corrupt local official so often deprive the people. As discussed in chapter 6, scaling can also be an active, discursive strategy. Corruption cases can be framed as limited and local, for instance through a narrative about a dishonest businessman whose greed brought him into trouble. At a higher scale, and with a larger scope, corruption cases may call into question the legitimacy of the entire political system. Knowing which problems can be discussed and at which scale is represented by Chinese journalists as a tacit understanding shared by everyone (Interview, Li Mingdao).

The second aspect of scale and media restrictions concerns the organization of the state-owned media. In principle the media is owned by the party-state, and every newspaper has an affiliation with the party or the state which provides it with an administrative rank. There is a division between central, provincial and local media outlets. Among the central media, the *People's Daily* has the highest rank. It is published by the CCP Central Committee and is the only paper with an administrative status equal to a department. The news bureau Xinhua also belongs to the central media and is attached to the State Council. There is an informal rule

that media entities may criticize administrative layers corresponding to their own rank and below, and Shi Youli explains that “It is more or less the case that for issues in the local areas, at the provincial level, it is quite easy for Beijing, central media, to report”. Administrative rank is important because it influences a media entity’s access to information, the size of its subsidies and who and what it may criticise (Fu and Cullen 1996). However, high administrative status restricts as well as enables. The *People’s Daily*, which has the highest administrative rank, is constrained by its status as the principal mouthpiece of the CCP. It is tacitly prohibited from publishing anything that breaks with the party line and its position makes it liable to strict censorship (Wu 1994).

The Chinese party-state is not a monolithic and unitary political structure, and different provinces have practiced various levels of regulation and media control. The position of *Southern Weekly* is related to the relative openness of the Guangdong provincial authorities. Guangdong was the first province to embark on the process of economic reforms and neighbouring Hong Kong’s influence has been strong, also within the media. Beginning in the 1980s people had access to Hong Kong radio and television and this led to a situation in which provincial media had to compete with entertaining programs that were very different from Chinese state-regulated education-oriented information. As a response, the Pearl River Economic Radio was established in 1986, and its focus on light entertainment, local social and economic issues represented an attempt to compete with Hong Kong radio. Similarly Hong Kong television has also had profound influence on local Guangdong television (Latham 2000).

However, there is no necessary relation between economic development and openness. Shanghai is often described as a locomotive in China’s

economic reform, but the Shanghainese media has operated under rather strict conditions (Interview, Zhao Sanpeng). Possible explanations may be that Shanghai's history, known for its cultural decadence in the century leading up to 1949 and a tradition for independent minded intellectual life, has convinced the city's leadership that the media needs to be closely controlled. The relationship between Shanghai provincial authorities and the central government has been close, and several of the top leadership, including former president Jiang Zemin, have come from Shanghai. According to the journalist Zhao Sanpeng, there is a saying that local media should not "give the centre or Jiang additional problems".

Positioning of problems at the local scale does not help if the scope of the issue is too broad. An illustrating case is the demonstrations in Daqing during the spring of 2002. Fifty thousand oil workers took to the streets in this industrial city in Heilongjiang province, in the north-east of China. According to Han Dongfang, a Hong-Kong based labour activist, this were the biggest demonstrations over labour issues since 1949 (Weston 2004). When I asked journalists why news about the demonstrations did not appear in the open Chinese media, their answers made it clear that this was unthinkable within the present system. Large-scale demonstrations directed against state-owned enterprises can only be reported by Xinhua journalists through the internal media channel. The main ambition of the party-state in such situations is to contain the protests, and they believe that public reports may inspire demonstrations in other localities as well and result in the problem getting out of hand. This does not prevent journalists from finding out about what is happening, since information spreads through informal channels, but they will not be able to act. The profound problems of Chinese state-owned enterprises mean

that any general analysis of the situation would risk questioning the economic policies that created the financial difficulties that have left innumerable workers without salaries and/or pensions for substantial periods of time. The discursive boundaries block reports that might inspire and instigate protest. Conflicts between workers and private counterparts are less problematic and reports about such incidents are quite frequent, even in the open media. These conflicts are smaller in scope, and the chances that the problem can be solved are higher.

News that has less obvious political implications is also restricted according to scope. For instance, accidents are divided into three categories: small, intermediate and big (Interview, Xu Feng). Small accidents involve less than five deaths, five to ten are intermediate and more than ten deaths is a big accident. Coverage of big accidents is subjected to stricter controls, and often only Xinhua reporters are allowed to report on them. These restrictions exemplify how the division between positive and negative news continues to shape media content in China. The discursive boundaries for the scope of accidents uphold the notion that the news ought to be *bearable*. The journalist Ai Hongwen formulates it this way: “the black is too black” it is difficult to publish the report. The notion of the need to protect the audience’s emotions is part of the paternalistic discourse that is typical for the mouthpiece role of media.

The boundaries that are best protected and most dangerous to cross are the ones protecting national interests, which are broadly defined. For instance, the armed forces, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), is a taboo and can only be represented through propaganda journalism. Foreign politics is another area that touches upon national interests, and where journalists have to respect the boundaries drawn up by the central gov-

ernment. When propaganda authorities are particularly wary regarding foreign news, it is also because reports on foreign issues have been a means of expressing opinions of domestic matters in China. During the 1980s, the *Economic World Herald* printed reports focusing on the development of Hungary and the central role of political reforms in Hungarian politics. These articles were written by the well-known researcher and political scientist Su Shaozhi, and made it possible for him to make the argument for political reforms in an indirect way (Li and White 1991). From the view of propaganda authorities, ideal coverage of foreign news reflects a careful balance between different, sometimes conflicting, interests. The Chinese media's reports about the United States demonstrate a critical attitude towards what is seen as US ambitions to dominate the world, as ostensibly exemplified by US accusations of Chinese human rights infringements such as the lack of freedom of expression, organisation and religion. Criticism of US politics is one of the areas where negative emotions may be released. This was particularly evident after the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1998, and has been in evidence again during the recent uproar over the Olympic torch relay. In 1998, for example, for several days the Chinese media was filled with severe criticism of the US as a false, dishonest hegemon who punished the peace-loving Chinese people for resisting the United States' ambition to rule the entire world (Sæther 2000). While party-state authorities assumed that this criticism served a positive nationalist purpose, they felt compelled to restrict the criticism of the US in order to prevent a negative influence on China's economic relationship with the US, in particular China's upcoming application for WTO membership.



The media must approach sensitive issues with caution, and a central aspect of Chinese propaganda has been the regulation of the words used to describe topics of particular political importance (Schoenhals 1992). Information from the propaganda authorities provides news organizations with definitions and terminology (*tifa*). Reporting on religion in general, and Tibetan Buddhism in particular, is sensitive, and must follow prescribed wording. The media is required to reflect the party-state's antagonism towards the Dalai Lama, and this is signalled through name-calling, such as 'splittist' and the 'renegade Dalai Lama'. Similarly the banning of the Falungong movement has meant that every mentioning of Falungong in the media had to be followed by the description 'the evil cult' (Brady 2008). To the audience, the use of *tifa* signals that this is propaganda journalism, conveying politically ratified information. Such signs demarcate boundaries that critical journalism cannot cross. Doing that would mean the same as explicitly challenging the political legitimacy of the party-state, and for journalists who wish to continue their practice, there is nothing to be gained in doing so. Instead, critical journalism has developed within less politically sensitive fields. It is clear, however, that Chinese critical journalists do try to shift the boundaries where possible. For instance, reports about the police have been sensitive, but as Fu and Cullen (1996) note, that some defamation cases have been brought by the police indicates that the police is increasingly subject to negative exposure in the media.

#### CREATING NEW SPACES OF REPRESENTATION

When critical journalists describe their professional identity, they position themselves as mediators between citizens and authorities. Their in-

vestigations are often inspired by contact with ordinary people. Critical journalists aim to create new spaces of representation by giving voice to people who would otherwise have few means of attracting attention and being heard. During the post-Mao period of economic reform, the media has become more interactive, as opposed to the top-down character of pure propaganda journalism. Call-in shows on the radio and letters to the editor in the print media have become common (Zhao 1998), and on the web, online news portals offer new channels for interactive communication (Lagerkvist 2006). Journalists who have established a reputation for being critical are often approached by people who want their case heard, either personally at the newspaper, or by letter (Interview, Zhao San-peng). Ai Hongwen explains that this was how he began an investigation of a corruption scandal in Zhejiang in 2001. Immigrants from Fujian province were working as fishermen in a village where they were exploited economically by the local government. Representatives for the fishermen contacted *Southern Weekend*, but the editor was sceptical because the case seemed difficult to investigate. The fishermen then approached Ai Hongwen personally and convinced him that this was an important case. During the course of investigation it became evident that behind the maltreatment of these immigrant fishermen there was a complex corruption case. Ai documented how police and government officials were involved with local mafia, and responsible for serious criminal acts. Only some aspects of this story were published in *Southern Weekend*. At that time the paper was already under substantial pressure and editors and journalists did not know whether or not the propaganda department would instigate disciplinary measures. However, Ai's knowl-

edge and understanding of the central actors in this story has led him on to further investigations of corruption and abuse of power.

The bottom-up approach prompts questions regarding the positionality of journalists in relation to citizens in general. Within the confines of the mouthpiece role, it is no problem that journalists, together with other authorities, have a higher social standing than the people to whom they communicate the party line. In the context of highly stratified Chinese society, interaction between people of different class backgrounds is not without its problems, and journalists in general belong to the educated urban middle class which often looks down upon peasants as backward and uncultured. Many Chinese are also hesitant to provide journalists with information because they fear that officials will be able to use the information against them (Interview, Shi Youli). To make people feel safer, and to compensate for the class differences, journalists have to be very conscious of the way they treat people, how they dress and talk, and how they approach people. Journalist Xu Feng emphasises that in order to establish good relations with different people, the journalist has to regard people as equals. A beggar and a prime minister have the same value, and the journalist is not above or below them in status. To Xu, this is the essence of the profession of journalism. To overcome people's reservations about talking to journalists, Xu negotiates with and explains things to them. He puts in plain words why he is working on a case, and in his experience most people calm down and open up when they understand what he's saying. He also makes sure that his outward appearance is very ordinary, so people will not feel intimidated. His education and role differentiate him from the people he interviews, but he tries to compensate for that by respecting them and using a language they will un-

derstand. He is also conscious that people's inhibitions about talking to journalists mean that he will not get the whole truth. This is not necessarily a problem, Xu argues, since two-thirds will usually be sufficient to write a story. Xu Feng's thoughts on what it means to be a journalist reflect a belief in the journalist as a neutral actor, which is also part of Western journalists' self-conception.

Being a critical journalist in China means working around limits. Journalists have to employ various strategies and approach problems from unusual angles in order to obtain information. de Burgh (2005) notices that the methods of investigative journalists everywhere are becoming increasingly similar. The same technology is available in China as elsewhere, but the lack of openness and transparency in China poses a particular challenge. Hence, when critical journalists conduct their investigations, they pursue a great number of leads. It is particularly important to trace the social networks of people involved, because this is decisive for determining the risk involved in exposing a story. Other important sources of information are financial transactions, criminal records and government information, as well as conducting interviews.

As mentioned in chapter 5, when there was an explosion in an elementary school in Jiangxi province, where school children had been exploited to produce fireworks, local authorities refused journalists access to the case. This meant that journalists could only write about it by approaching the case from another angle. Shi Youli tells that she had been interested in questions regarding education for a long time, and that she originally wanted to go to Jiangxi to write an article about education and security. She first called a colleague to ask about the opportunities for conducting interviews, and was told that nobody was being allowed in. Not even the

journalists of *Education Daily*, the Department of Education's own mouthpiece, had access. The journalist's next strategy was to approach the department for interviews or relevant statistics. This was a tedious process, because she had to post her questions and a copy of her journalist's ID, and all in vain, because the department never responded. When she called the department, it seemed impossible to get past their information controllers. While telling this, Shi Youli made fun of such gatekeepers, saying that they are all retired elevator operators and that rejecting people gives them a sense of power. By ridiculing the gatekeepers at the Department of Education, Shi Youli vented her frustration over the lack of information from central authorities and the waste of time and energy by of journalists who want to mediate this information. Finally, the only thing the people at the department told her was that relevant statistics could be accessed on their website, but the journalist never found them. This is a typical situation: Chinese authorities have established websites in order to appear more available and responsive, but in practice information is still guarded and difficult to obtain.

Searching for a new approach, Shi Youli then called the local Department of Education. The man she spoke with was rather reluctant to talk to her, but she managed to strike up a conversation about more general things. During this talk he admitted that it was part of the local culture to "let the children do some easy work with their small fingers". Based on the information from this source, Shi managed to find a person who could confirm that the explosion was caused by the children's production of firecrackers. Shi's experience is illustrative of the practices within Chinese investigative journalism in several respects. First, it is essential for the journalist to find an acceptable entry into a topic. In this example,

education and security topics constitute a more general approach and could be used to overcome local authorities' censorship. Second is the journalist's impression of governmental authorities as distant and inaccessible, guarded by ignorant people with too much power. That websites are offered as an excuse for not answering direct questions is also a common experience among Chinese journalists. The third typical feature is that Shi nonetheless manages to obtain some useful information due to a combination of her own personal skills and because she represents the media on a higher geographical level than the local government official.

The power relations between higher and lower geographical levels sometimes sufficiently embolden the central media to cross the limits set by local officials. This was the case with the Jiujiang flood in 1998 in which the dykes were about to burst, as discussed in more detail in chapter 5. Local officials forbade journalists from publishing anything about the story, but *China Youth Daily* ignored the prohibition and published the information. Two days later the local paper did so too and people were saved who might otherwise have become flood victims (Interview, Zhao Sanpeng).

Due to the difficulties in acquiring information from officials, as well as the fear among people of being interviewed, critical journalists in China depend upon their own networks for information. One journalist described how his own work experience within the judiciary from the time before he became a journalist has provided him with a network of former colleagues and friends who can give him important information. He emphasised the value of retired cadres as useful sources, as they are less vulnerable and often dare to speak their mind in cases of corruption and malpractice. Experience from previous cases is also an important

resource in journalists' investigations. For instance, if a case has led to good relations to public security officials, they might assist the journalists in later investigations (Interview, Shi Youli). For university educated journalists, relations to other alumni can be a particularly useful resource in their investigations. Alumni from elite universities obtain important positions and can provide information from various fields (Interview, Fan Yihong).

In addition to carefully conducted methods of investigation, working around the boundaries set by the authorities involves employing discursive strategies. The use of academic experts or as sources can contribute to discursively transferring the boundaries from academia to the media field. Universities and the media are two different discourse orders with different limits on speech. Chinese academics and researchers have more freedom than journalists to present controversial statements, and hence interdiscursivity becomes a means of extending the spaces of representation within the media. This was the case when *Southern Weekend* started to publish social news in the 1980s. At that time scholars and academics wrote essays which the paper published, and this became the inspiration for the paper's launch of investigative and critical journalism on social issues. Shi Youli explained that:

Normally we don't get many interviews from above, we just search our databases and find some policies and try to get some ordinary people to talk and...not officials, but the experts, the scholars to talk. That is easy. We try to do this and now the scholars are willing to talk about their views.

Scholars and UNAids were important actors in the process of making AIDS a topic of public discourse. Representatives for the UN organization that had started to work with China's AIDS problem contacted

*Southern Weekend*, and the journalists started to research how coverage on AIDS was being handled in international news. They used the internet, which was still a new tool for Chinese journalists around 1998, and discovered that the problem was already very serious. In *Southern Weekend's* first exposure of the AIDS problem in China, they sent journalists to Yunnan province to interview people, and to illustrate the article, they used a picture of an ill and weak girl, only four or five years old (interview, Fan Yihong). The picture received a lot of attention and inspired compassion from the paper's readers. In the discursive opening of AIDS as a topic within the public sphere, *Southern Weekend* combined the use of experts as sources with the individualising strategy of presenting one suffering child as a symbol of an extensive problem. Both strategies contributed to the paper's ability to work around the limits of journalism in China in the 1990s.

In democratic countries, the political opposition is very important in facilitating journalists' investigations (de Burgh 2000c). Within the Chinese one-party system, journalists do not have that kind of backing, but they still make use of conflicts within the state. Oppositional factions within the political leadership were important for the development of investigative journalism in China during the 1980s (Zhao 1998). Few journalists have this kind of elite support, and a more common strategy is to utilize conflicts between different departments of the local state. When Shi Youli investigated a trafficking case in Guangxi province, part of the problem was the weak border control that allowed Vietnamese traffickers to cross the border. The frontier border control section and the public security bureau had opposing interests in this case. The frontier section did not want attention drawn to the lack of effective border controls,



while the public security bureau thought that the traffickers were a public security problem and wanted the problem exposed in order to achieve more efficient border control. Such differences within the party-state can be leveraged to unearth out new information about social problems. Wu Yunlu emphasised that even though the party has a central level, it does not make the interests of different places unitary. Critical journalists have used these differences:

Newspapers have discovered that within the party organization, not every level and branch has the same interest. It is within these differences that newspapers have sought for their space for survival.

(Interview Wu Yunlu)

Different local authorities also have varying degrees of tolerance for critical and investigative journalism. A media scholar, Min Yuxi, gives an example from Shanxi province, where a city mayor in Changzhi encouraged critical journalism and declared that he had no use for journalists who did not dare to criticize. Min says that this development has been followed with great interest, both from media people and from the central government, but no one has tried to intervene. Local differences in levels of control may also be used when a journalist who is not allowed to publish a story in his or her own newspaper contact colleagues in a less restricted locality to have it published there.

Utilizing scale is a discursive and social strategy that enables journalists to bring forward information about which the public would otherwise not know. This extends the space of representation, and contributes to normalizing critical discourse. As previously discussed, journalists' scaling of social problems is a conscious strategy that doesn't only take into account geographical levels. When Shou Yan recounted her

experience in reporting about the political mobilization among Hepatitis B carriers, she emphasised how she approached the case from the individual scale and only hinted at the more systemic context of the case. At the outset, the striking feature of this case was how activists used the internet and mobilized against the labour law that excluded Hepatitis B carriers from the labour market. This, however, was too closely connected to political mobilization and could not be presented as the forefront of the story. Instead, Shou approached the case upside-down: not from the angle of the social movement, but from the angle of individual stories of misery and suffering. She first wrote about a two-year-old child who was not admitted to a nursery centre, and then on the basis of the personal narratives touched upon the internet campaign and its supporters' request for an end to discrimination against Hepatitis B carriers.

A major ambition of critical journalists in China is to give voice to the weak. Wu Yunlu says that he wants to argue against the two-track society, where the division between the rich and the poor only grows deeper over time. For this purpose one discursive strategy is to use the language of the past but employ it for new ends. The CCP's discourses on equality can be turned around and used as a critique of present policies. In this way, journalists avoid highlighting explicit systemic criticism, because China is allegedly a communist country in which socialist values are praised. This resistance strategy has also been employed by other groups. Weston (2004) describes how the protesting oil workers in Daqing represented themselves as being allies of the CCP, and how they appealed to the paternalist discourse of the CCP. Similar discursive strategies constituted means of resistance among American slaves before the US Civil War, who used the owners' paternalist discourses to appeal for better

living conditions (Scott 1990). When journalists employ CCP discourses on equality to indirectly criticise present policies and injustice, it creates a protective shield against interference. This is a necessity in a context of domination, but it does not prevent the message from being conveyed.

### *Summing up*

The critical press in China is characterized by a conditional autonomy. The need for self-regulation by critical journalists reflects their working conditions within an authoritarian one-party state. In order to avoid negative sanctions, critical and investigative journalists carefully evaluate the possible consequences of their reports and see their ability to foresee and avoid difficulties as central to their successful practising of their profession. Their work is subject to control and restrictions from both party-state and private actors. Freedom of expression is a constitutional right in China, but it is subordinate to the protection of state interests. This deprives critical journalists of the protection which their colleagues in established democracies have. When journalists cross the boundary of politically accepted media discourse, they risk disciplinary sanctions such as self-criticisms and dismissal, but also more severe punishments such as prison sentences.

After the upheavals of 1989, the CCP leadership decided to increase the emphasis on propaganda and thought work, while recognising the necessity of adjusting propaganda methods to the emerging information society. Agenda-setting (*yulun daoxiang*) is the result of this policy, and represents a more subtle approach to propaganda. This turn has opened the way for more critical and investigative journalism, as long as it is restricted in scale and scope and avoids problems that cannot easily be

solved. In this sense, critical journalism in China can be interpreted as propaganda, just by new means. The exposure of limited problems at the local scale of the state can contribute to promoting an image of a more responsive and legitimate central state that listens and responds to the grievances of the people. Nevertheless, the ambitions of critical journalists do not correspond to the aims of propaganda authorities. Rather than accepting their boundaries, critical journalists work around the limits. They seek to establish the media as a bottom-up communication channel. Through their social and discursive strategies they frame criticism in ways subtle enough to be allowed publication, and direct enough to suggest the existence of severe social problems in Chinese society. The ability to do this secures a conditional autonomy resulting in new spaces of representation.

## Chapter eight

# Conclusion

This dissertation is motivated by an interest in how our ways of thinking and expressing ourselves work politically. Discourses are linguistic means of categorizing and organizing the world, and as we establish relations between signs that result in discourses, we create meaning. Surrounding our discourses is a field of other potential meanings, alternative possible articulations; due to this, discourses are always constructed in relation to what they are not. This is where the *political* aspect of discourse analysis comes from: by shaping our conceptions, discourses make some acts more likely than others. In daily language, as well as in scholarly exchanges, words are often conceived as being ephemeral and less important and influential than acts. Within discourse theory, this binary opposition between discourse and the real is criticized (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Discourses gain power from the way they are embedded in institutions and this makes them resistant to change.

The importance of the media as a social and political institution is related to the power of discourse. This is the background for this dissertation's focus on the media's political role in China. The media has an ability to create and distribute particular outlooks on the world that contrib-

ute to establishing some discourses as more central, and more normal, than others. That is why political control of the media is important to authoritarian states. Changes in the media's discursive practices are likely to influence the audience's conceptions of society; in the context of an authoritarian one-party state, social change is dangerous unless it supports the existing relations of domination.

Over the course of the post-Mao economic reforms the party-state has allowed the Chinese media to be diversified. This has opened the way for the development of new media discourses which have made critical and investigative journalism part of the media environment. This may seem paradoxical: how can critical and investigative journalism be compatible with the control and limits imposed on media practice in China? This apparent paradox led me to the first research question considered in this dissertation, namely:

*What are the political roles of the Chinese media?*

In liberal democracies, the media's political role is closely connected to protecting and upholding democracy. The media serves democracy by providing people with a channel for articulating grievances and criticism, and by keeping citizens up to date so they can make well-informed choices in elections. Investigative and critical journalism is the principal expression of media's independence and enables the media to keep government and other authorities in check. In authoritarian contexts, state ownership is assumed to prevent the media from fulfilling this role, and that is probably the reason why the media's role in political transitions has received little attention (O'Neil 1998). Within liberal democracies the notion of the media as an independent social force has begun to be criti-

cized for underestimating the linkages between media and other political and economic interests (Curran 2005, de Burgh 2000c). The media is never completely free and independent of other social actors, and it is important to study changes in the media's practices, because they are indicative of changing power relations.

China is clearly in transition, moving from a planned economy to a market-driven economy, and its media has been adapting to new economic circumstances. However, as Lagerkvist (2006) comments, this does not imply that Chinese media is transitional in the sense that it will become similar to the media of liberal democracies. To understand the political roles of Chinese media today requires a contextual approach, and this has been the objective of this dissertation.

The hegemonic political role of the Chinese media is to be the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party. This role was already developed and defined in the period before the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. After the revolution the media was positioned as an integrated part of the party-state and was given an instrumental role in contributing to the formation of the new China. The CCP assigned two main tasks to the media. The first was to propagate the party line to the public (Cheek 1989). The second was to reflect the attitudes, conditions and responses among the people (Nathan 1985). This double assignment created a tension in the media's political role, as journalists were expected to be propaganda workers and investigative at the same time. The solution to this conflict was the establishment of a two-channel system, where so-called negative news were restricted to an internal channel (Polumbaum 1990).

As a consequence of the economic reform process, media organizations have increased their financial independence, while continuing to be

controlled by the state. New reliance on income from advertising and sales has made entertainment and lighter media content widespread. This has challenged the dominant position of the propaganda produced by mouthpiece journalism; as a result, the traditional party-supported media entities have created media conglomerates that have launched more popular publications to cater to readers' interests. Through this process, party-state authorities conceived of market interests as an additional aspect of the political role of the media (Lee et al. 2006). Contributing to the economic development and teaching the people about the new economy was understood to be part of the media's mouthpiece role (Zhao 1998).

The new importance of the saleability of the media has facilitated the progress of critical and investigative journalism within parts of the Chinese media. The newspaper *Southern Weekend* has been at the forefront of this development. As a weekly paper located in Guangzhou the *Southern Weekend* has taken advantage of the relatively loose restrictions on freedom of expression within Guangdong media as compared to the rest of the country. Journalists and editors working for this paper have defined their political role in opposition to the top-down direction of the mouthpiece discourse. Their objective has been to establish the paper as a channel for bottom-up communication. This has meant reflecting people's grievances, exposing corruption, abuse of power and other social problems. To be able to do so, *Southern Weekend* defined their critical journalism as social news, in order to distinguish it from political news.

Diversification of the media during the period of economic reform has added new facets to the political roles of the Chinese media. These roles now reflect hybrid conceptions of the media's political roles, combining



co-optation, loyalty and conditional autonomy. For instance, the *China Women's Daily*, previously a propaganda organ, now voices critical concerns, while continuing to be the mouthpiece of the *All China Women's Association*. Hybrid roles are also the result of the widespread practice of paid journalism. This means that the mouthpiece conception is being extended from being the party's mouthpiece, to a more general form of advocacy journalism, one serving economic interests as well as political interests. As part of this complex media context, the party-state accepts critical journalism to a certain extent, and regards exposure of limited and local problems as being in line with its own interests. The political roles of the Chinese media now contain other objectives besides being the mouthpiece of the party, but these are conditional, and subject to strict regulation. The second research question of the dissertation has addressed the power relations involved in the development of a critical press:

*How is the media's conditional autonomy being restricted, and how do critical journalists attempt to increase their autonomy?*

The concept of 'conditional autonomy' contains two signs that pull in opposite directions. How can something that is conditional be autonomous, when autonomy triggers connotations such as independence and impartiality? As I have shown in chapter 7, this contradiction quite accurately captures the tension between containment and independence experienced by critical journalists in China. The conditionality of media practices requires critical journalists and their employers to practice self-regulation. On the basis of their experience and interpretation of political opportunity structures, critical journalists try to ensure that their work stays within the limits of the politically acceptable. 'Political' is a discour-

sive nodal point in this regard, because 'the political' represents the boundaries of issues that can only be expressed within the propaganda discourse. Self-regulation is also built into the news organizations themselves: since editors are responsible for the work of their journalists, they tend to value security over bravery.

The conditionality of critical journalists' autonomy stems from a complex set of restrictions. Propaganda authorities continuously distribute information on current norms, and local authorities and private actors frequently interfere in the work of journalists, resulting in a lack of predictability regarding the boundaries of critical discourse. In addition, there are a number of general laws that can be invoked to impose negative sanctions on transgressions by critical media. The absence of a media law means that journalists are not protected by the party-state while conducting their inquiries, and there is no law that gives them, or other citizens, a right to access information. In consequence, critical journalists must be alert to avoid acts that will bring about negative sanctions from the party-state authorities. They risk prison sentences and violence as well as the loss of their jobs as journalists, and they seek to avoid these dangers through conscious discursive and social strategies.

The discursive strategies of critical journalism reflect the need to frame social problems in a way that does not raise accusations about subversion of the social order and stability. Polyphonic expressions are open to more diverse interpretations, and this reduces the risk of negative sanctions. In the articles from *Southern Weekend* discussed in chapter 6, critical texts are formulated in ways that relate to the hegemonic mouthpiece discourse, either as a 'defining other', or by including aspects commonly associated with propaganda. Polyphonic expressions invite the reader

actively to interpret and evaluate, and this enhances the critical potential in the article's descriptions of social problems, while avoiding explicit criticism. For example, when the texts focus on individual cases, the reader may infer a more systemic explanation as to why these people suffer from such grave problems. On the other hand, the depiction of the suffering and misery of individuals evoke compassion, rather than directing attention towards the political responsibility of the party-state. Polyphony is achieved by balancing different perspectives, which is another means of presenting social criticism in public discourse. This contributes to the conditional autonomy of the media, because it opens up a space of representation outside of the hegemonic mouthpiece discourse.

As a response to the new information society, the possibilities offered by the internet and the developments of a more diversified media, the propaganda authorities have set aside the ambition of controlling what people think. Instead they are concentrating their efforts on controlling what people think about, by using methods of agenda-setting. This has raised the question of whether critical journalism also serves a propaganda purpose, albeit by new means. This logic is parallel to what Scott (1990) calls the hydraulic metaphor of resistance, which supports theories that assume that critical social strategies are means of letting off steam in order to stabilize existing relations of domination. If this were the case, critical journalists would be pacified and content with the spaces of representation available to them. However, a main finding of this dissertation is that they are not. Critical journalists continue to put pressure on, and to try to work around, the limits imposed on the media by the authoritarian context in which they work. They make use of the acceptance for exposure of local issues to focus on topics of general importance.

Critical journalists have made use of the geographical organization of media ownership and control, as illustrated by Southern Weekend's position at the forefront of the development of a critical journalism between the mid 1990s and 2002. In their investigative methods, critical journalists try to use their knowledge, their networks and their experiences to foresee reactions and to avoid problems. They carefully choose approaches that are less likely to cause problems while still managing to communicate the existence of serious social problems in Chinese society.

### *Contributions to relevant debates*

With this dissertation I have hoped to make a contribution to the debate on political change and media's role in China. As a political geographer, the spatial aspects of journalists' practices, such as their discursive scaling of social issues, caught my interest when I began working on this project. This awareness on the spatiality of politics adds an important perspective to the general debate about the role and situation of the media in China. The party-state is not a monolithic structure, and critical journalists have carved out their new political role by utilizing differences in control between places. They have exploited the fact that similar phenomena have different meanings depending on their context, and this consciousness has been crucial for journalists' social and discursive strategies for expanding the spaces of representation in Chinese public discourse. The dissertation's combination of a post-structural approach to the politics of meaning with human geography's emphasis on contextuality demonstrates the close relation between meaning and materiality. This dissertation shows that the politics of meaning are inseparable from processes of political change.

However, this dissertation also suggests that the media's role as an influential social and political institution means that the media ought to be considered to be among the central objects of study for political geographers. This is not yet the case, but the media's roles in society are too important to be left only to media studies. Among the potential interfaces between political geography and the media are debates on representation and democratization, power and resistance, as well as the media's role in shaping and distributing discourses on social issues.

In the debate about the course of political change in China, the relation between economic and political liberalization continues to be a central issue. On the one hand, the legacy of modernization theory inspires a belief in a causal relationship between the introduction of a market-driven economy and free elections. On the other hand, contextual analyses of democratic transitions do not support such optimism (Nathan 2003, Pei 2007). This dissertation directs attention at discursive and social practices that have a potential democratizing effect within an authoritarian context. This does not imply that the development within the media field will be the cause of a Chinese transition to democracy, but rather that relations of domination within an authoritarian context are changeable. Critical journalists in China have succeeded in extending the space available for critical discourse within the public sphere, and this has brought about new opportunities for citizens to have their problems and grievances addressed. The conditionality of the media's autonomy means that this is a space in which the party-state retains the veto over what can and cannot be said, but any reversal of the development of new spaces of representation would likely inflict high costs on the party-state.

The changes within the media field indicate that institutions within the party-state can assume new roles. The development of a more critical journalism has added a bottom-up approach to the media's purpose, in addition to the top-down propaganda channel defined through the mouthpiece role. A similar process of role accumulation has taken place among delegates to the National People's Congress. Whereas previously delegates were confined to mediating central party policies locally, they have expanded their role as local delegates representing their constituencies (O'Brien 1994). Institutional diversification can be seen even within China's state-controlled unions. During the era of market reforms, the unions have expanded their field of influence, because their position within the party-state structure gives them substantial power in relation to private enterprises (Chen 2003). The institutional reform which has received the most scholarly attention is the local elections, because they represent an apparent element of democracy in an otherwise authoritarian structure (Shi 2000). Taken together, these examples illustrate that within the existing organizational structure of the Chinese party-state, changes in the relationship between state and society are underway. These reforms share the conditionality that characterize the situation of the critical press in China, but nevertheless reveal how people use their available freedom to carve out new spaces of representation.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to demonstrating the political importance and influence of discourse. In contexts of domination, resistance is conducted through infrapolitics, which contain strategies that cannot easily be identified and reacted to (Scott 1990). The Chinese party-state has shown great willingness and ability to control discourse. Propaganda authorities' distribution of *tifa*, denoting politically certified language on

sensitive issues, shows insight into the power of language. In today's China, the technologies of the information society make it more difficult to control public discourse, but measures of control have developed alongside people's increasing access to information (Lagerkvist 2006). The major contribution by investigative journalists to the infrapolitics of resistance in the Chinese society is their normalization of critical discourse. Through their exposure of social problems, critical journalists have succeeded in making criticism a tolerated aspect of the media field.

The relationships between discourse and materiality and between discourse and social practice are central issues in this dissertation. Within discourse theory, it is argued that as our approach to the social world is mediated through language, there is no reason to draw a line between discourse and materiality (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Discourses are institutionally embedded; I have shown how the development of a more critical media discourse has been enabled through institutional reforms in the media field. What discourse theory does not sufficiently explain and analyse is the relationship between discourse and social practices. The theory's structuralist inheritance leaves little explanatory space for how social actors work to change the discursive structures that limit and enable their strategies. The final stages of the work with this dissertation have made me increasingly conscious of the importance of developing the insights of discourse theory in a direction which acknowledges the importance of human agency.

### *Developments in the field of critical journalism in China*

The fieldwork for this dissertation was conducted in the period July to December 2002. The interviews and newspaper articles that constitute the

central empirical material illuminate the relations of domination and journalists' strategies of resistance in a formative phase. In the period of time leading up to 2008 and the Beijing Olympics there has been a continuous discussion of whether media regulation has become more severe, and whether or not there has been a backlash regarding the media's freedom of expression in China. In this debate, it is important to emphasise that the media has never enjoyed unlimited freedom of expression in China. When Hu Jintao was chosen as Jiang Zemin's successor at the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in China in November 2002, there was a hope among observers and actors in the Chinese media field that he would liberalize media control. This has not been the case, as CCP rule under Hu continues to uphold the mouthpiece role of media (Brady 2008). To the party-state, media control is as important as before, and propaganda authorities seek to contain media discourse as part of their agenda-setting policy (*yulun daoxiang*). In a media 'reform' in 2003, a large number of newspapers were closed down or forced to merge because their financial situation was judged to be unsound. This reform was motivated by the CCP's aim to secure subscribers to the key party-papers, and contained a wish to lessen the burden of offices' forced subscriptions to local party papers (He 2004, Liebman 2005). It was also an act that demonstrated the conditionality of the media's autonomy. The enormous increase in the number of tabloids and small local publications during the period of economic reform made media control increasingly resource-intensive, and through closures and mergers, the authorities aimed to acquire oversight and control (He 2004).

The outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2003 clearly illustrated the conflict between the people's right to know and the



party-state's perceived need to contain information. The last months of 2002 were characterized by intensified media control due to the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. The CCP always requires increased compliance and emphasis on positive news during major party-state events. The particular timing made reports on a contagious and dangerous disease very sensitive, and activated the restrictive discourse in favour of social stability. Rather than valuing the importance of information in such situations, party-state authorities believe that news blockades will prevent panic and mobilization among the population. Again, it was Guangdong media and the *Southern* group that pushed the party-state's limits when they were the first to publish news about the disease (Zhang 2006). Not until April, when SARS had spread to other countries, did the party-state allow extensive coverage on the topic. These reports were strictly limited by the mouth-piece discourse and the focus was on the party-state's efforts to control the situation. The paternalistic propaganda discourse was employed to calm the audience by reassuring them that the party-state would protect them (Zhang 2006).

The cover-up of the SARS outbreak is an example of the continued media repression in China (Esarey 2006). The general manager and vice president of the *Southern Metropolitan Post* were sentenced to eight and six years in prison for corruption, most likely because of their paper's role in disclosing news related to SARS. The paper's editor-in-chief was detained for five months and then released. Imprisoning the leadership of the *Southern Metropolitan Post* for alleged corruption offences is in line with Jiang Zemin's directive of handling political questions by non-political means (He 2004). Brady (2008) supports the interpretation that the limited reporting on SARS shows that the Chinese media has become

increasingly restricted, and she sees this as a consequence of the authorities' strengthening of the propaganda system in the post-1989 period. However, in the SARS crisis it was media itself that put pressure on the party-state authorities to disclose news about the disease. This demonstrates agency on both sides, something that is underestimated in Brady's work. The strengthening of the propaganda *xitong* does not imply that critical journalists have accepted new limitations without resistance. The party-state's policies for containing and controlling critical discourse are a consequence of the pressure it perceives, suggesting that power relations within the media field have changed over the course of the reform period.

The Beijing Olympics are set to be held in August 2008 and are an event of great symbolic importance to the CCP leadership. Due to the party-state's established practice of restricting criticism and negative exposure in sensitive periods, the event is likely to be accompanied by increased repression within the media field. The party-state's power to sanction journalists and media continues to impose conditionality on the critical media, but it does not eradicate the work conducted by critical and investigative journalists over the last decade. Critical discourse has become part of the public sphere in China, and to the audience this gives even the absence of criticism a new meaning. The conditional autonomy of the critical press in China means that more voices are being heard and more problems are being discussed. Through this, new spaces of representation have arisen.

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# Appendix

## THE STRANGE DISEASE

(*Southern Weekend* November 11, 2000)

### "怪病"

七十年代末至九十年代中期,由于主管部门疏于管理以及地下血站血头们利欲熏心,河南省东部、南部地区的广大农村非法采血现象十分猖獗,直接导致目前艾滋病在该地区爆发和蔓延,有些当年采血严重的村庄现在甚至成了艾滋病村。

一线夕阳透过狭窄的房门,穿过散了的芦苇篱笆,一半落在拥被而睡的女人身上,一半落在床前一只残破的塑料盆里。女人是"怪病"缠身无法下床的孙爱娟,盆里是她的呕吐物,用沙土盖着。

她的男人张军武,36岁,提前谢了顶,穿着一件看不清颜色的绒衣,瑟瑟缩缩站在床前,说着老婆和"怪病"的事情,说着说着,就有了哭腔。

今年夏天,孙爱娟"感冒"了,低烧不退,同时止不住地拉肚子。看了几回医生,吃了些药这后,她不去医院了,一是家里再也拿不出钱,二是她已经知道,自己得的是"怪病"。

"怪病"是治不好的。它是个幽灵,三年来,一直在这个与新蔡县人民医院一路之隔的小村子里游荡,已经有20条生命被它一批一批地带走。无一例外,20个人都是青壮年,开始时都是"感冒",发低烧,拉肚子,还有,多年以前,都卖过血。

心性和善的张军武没有办法,只能眼睁睁地看着自己的妻子在床上一天天地瘦下去,更可怕的是,他也被"怪病"缠住了。他现在也整天"感冒",掉头发,这都是"怪病"的先兆。

在西河村,还有另外两个女人遭受着与孙爱娟一样的厄运,她们是33岁的刘小荣和48岁的陈霞。

三个家庭都是女人卧床不起,男人困坐床头,孩子退学,庄稼荒芜,同时,负债累累。

西河村人口近千人,根据村民自己不完全统计,当年有 300 多人卖过血,现在,在 300 多人中,超过一半的人发低烧、出虚汗、拉肚子。他们中肯定有人要步那 20 人和孙爱娟她们的后尘。

与西河村挨着的烟洼、孔岗等村庄近两年也有十几个青壮年人死于这种“怪病”。

大约在去年,西河村的村民知道了,“怪病”就是艾滋病。

就目前而言,除了卫生防疫部门,新蔡县古吕镇西河村的情况尚不为外人所知,但 100 多公里外的上蔡县芦岗镇的陈楼村早已因为媒介报道而被称为“艾滋病村”。

自从 1998 年陈楼村第一个艾滋病患者陈伟军死亡以来,这个只有 800 多人的小村庄已经有 19 人被艾滋病夺去生命。1999 年,当地一位医生深感事态严重,遂向湖北医科大学第二附属医院的桂希恩教授求援。桂教授第一次在陈楼村有选择地抽取了 11 份血样,结果 10 份 HIV 呈阳性;第二次在自愿化验的村民中抽取 155 份血样,其中 96 份 HIV 呈阳性,艾滋病病毒感染率竟然高达 61.9%!

在河南成千上万的村庄里,西河、陈楼这样的村庄究竟有多少,目前尚无法获得具体数字。不过,河南省卫生防疫站副站长王哲说,目前河南全省每个地市都已经发现了艾滋病人,自 1995 年发现第一例艾滋病患者至今,全省共有患者 636 例。显然是这一数字与实际情况大有出入。王哲承认,这个数字是各级卫生防疫部门层层报上来的,肯定会有漏报的病人,而且其数字很可能要远远不止掌握到的区区 636 例。

据一位知情人土透露,从全省范围看,黄河以南地区较为严重,其中尤以东部和南部的开封、商丘、周口、驻马店四市感染者最多。据说,目前这四个地区已经没有空白县了。

在河南以自费防治艾滋病而知名的高耀杰教授经常接到这四个地区农村患者的求救信,但上蔡县人民医院一位姓李的医生说,高教授掌握的数字比他们门诊时接触到的病人少得多。

上蔡县卫生防疫站一位自称自己正处在火山口上的负责人私下里说,单单一个上蔡县县,艾滋病感染者就将近一万人,他想把实情说出来,以对得起自己的良心,但是又害怕吃不了兜着走。

## 卖血

目前河南农村艾滋病爆发和直接原因就是当年的卖血。

任何一位病人对自己和当地卖血史的回忆,都会令人瞠目结舌。

自文革后期起,驻马店、周口地区以及相邻的安徽阜阳一带,不少农民卖血谋生,到八十年代初期,卖血的农民渐渐增多,尤其是从八十年代末、九十年代初开始,豫东、豫南血站密布,引得不少农民争相卖血。也就是在这个时候,出现了卖血专业户、专业村,并且由一个小的自然村扩大到大的行政村,由一个行政村扩大到一个乡,再由一个乡扩大到相邻的几个县,卖血遂成为当地的一项"产业"。

当地一位人士说,以上蔡县城为中心,从西边的无量寺、大路李,到县南的芦岗、邵店、延伸至县东南的五龙、杨屯以及汝南的金铺、留盆,这周围十来个乡镇形成了一个方圆几十公里的卖血重灾区,也正是现在的艾滋病高发区。

卖过血的农民说,10年前,上蔡的血流向全国各地。东至上海,西到乌鲁木齐,北起黑龙江,南至广州、海南,这些地方没有长途跋涉,各地流动的上蔡县的献血队,也会有上蔡人的血从上蔡运送到那里。

采访中,有人说之所以会有这么多人卖血,是因为在当时的情境之下,任何身处其中的人都难免要跟着走。在一些献血村,甚至到了不献血的小伙子讨不上老婆、姑娘嫁不出去的地步。

最主要的原因还是穷。

上蔡县一位干部说:"每一个卖血的农民都有一段悲惨的故事。

11月26日下午,在西河村刘小荣家,这位已经卧床半年多的母亲泪流满面:"那时候,孩子小,没吃的,就想去抽血换点钱回来给孩子买点好吃的。

她的丈夫王平坐在一边,一脸无奈。他说河西村地势低,癞蛤蟆撒泡尿都会把地给淹了。1975年发大水,村里第一回有人卖血,打那以后,只要年头不好,左邻右舍就去血站伸胳膊。

陈楼村已经确诊患上艾滋病的陈军说,这么多的老乡拼死去卖血赚钱,主要是用于盖房、成家和老人治病等。

陈军,17岁卖血,19岁结婚,从1981年一直卖到1997年,从"全采"卖到"单采"。17年里跟着献血队走遍了全国各地,哪儿贵去哪儿卖,17年里他和媳妇一起抽了无数管血,挣了5万多块,治老母亲的偏瘫花掉了一万多,盖四间房子花了将近一万,交超生费4000多,其余的钱都不知道去哪儿了,现在还欠镇里一万元贷款。

周口和驻马店所辖的沈丘、鹿邑、新蔡、平舆、汝南等18个县市,虽然人均耕地较多,但地力贫瘠,地势低洼,有些县乡就是淮河流域的洪水走廊,所以百姓生活困难,不少县市至今仍是国家级贫困县。



## "杀了他!"

当年的卖血人,不管现在有没有感染上艾滋病,心目中最育恨的人是"血头"。

据记者了解,当年一般的三种人做血头。

一是卫生防疫部门工作人员,有的是医生,有的是国家血站或防疫站的职工;二是这一类人员的亲戚朋友。第三种就是那些头脑活络、在地方上有点关系、从血民中"脱颖而出"的人。

在陈楼村,群众反映,当年最大的血头是上蔡县的医生尼 XX。

陈军说,1995年,国家已经禁止地下血站采血,尼还是带着儿子、儿媳妇、女儿、女婿,开着一辆车,在陈楼村租了四间房子,不体检,不化脸,来人伸胳膊就采,一边采了整整十天。床不够用了,灶台上、柴火垛边都躺着人,这只胳膊抽两袋,换只胳膊再抽。

除了在陈楼设点,尼还到黄铺,城北肖庄等地非法采血。

尼 XX 之外,还有齐 XX、董 XX 等人。

齐 XX 的窝点在一个名叫十里铺的村庄。有一段时间,上蔡县卫生局的大楼都腾出来让他抽血。

董 XX 的窝点在董寨,陈军说,董寨每天最少有十个血头,其中董氏兄弟有钱有势,附近几个乡镇都有他的采血点。

在新蔡,西河村村民反映,自 1991 年至 1995 年,县城附近有三个血站,三个血站的头目都不一般。为了揽生意,这几个血站派人到村里大肆鼓动,说什么"来回换换血,对身体好些",说什么正常人一天可以抽两次。

血头的出现是在八十年代末期,也正是这个时候采血由全采改成了单采。所谓单采,是提取血清后,将澄下来的红血球再输回供血人体内。由于这一变化,加上血头的肆意妄为,导致十年后今天的这场灾难。

村民们说,对于血头而言,克扣盘剥血民卖血钱,是天经地义的事情,最可怕的是他们草菅人命,采血过程中不体检,不化验,消毒不严格,多人共用一个针头,输回红血球时经常出错,等等,正因为如此,才会一病百病,否则无法解释现在会有这么多老实巴交的农民感染上艾滋病毒。

在上蔡县陈楼村,当谈起这些当年的"吸血鬼"时,一个 30 多岁的艾滋病人咬牙切齿说"杀了他"!

但是这帮人个个活得逍遥自在,当时他们也被有关部门抓过,但是最终不是放了,不放没钱花还是"抓了放,放了抓,抓了不放没钱花"。

## 现状

一种可以说是最为可怕和病魔,降临到最为弱小的人身上,会是一种怎样的不幸?

在驻马店、周口等地,有两个传说流传甚广:一个是上蔡陈楼的病人为了报复他人,抽了身上的血注射到西瓜里;另一个是新蔡河西的病人将身上的血注射到猪肉里。

经记者实地调查,这纯系谣言。而且,有一点艾滋病预防常识的人都知道,即便有人这么做了,艾滋病毒也不会存活,不会再度传染。

但是,那些没有被病毒感染的村庄,那些没有被感染的健康的人,依然在起劲地传播着这两个流言。他们自己不买,也劝别人不要买陈楼人种出来的菜,不要买河西人养肥的猪。

即便在本村,艾滋病人也在遭受了当年无钱无粮之苦、抽血之苦,颠沛流离之苦后,又开始遭受被人拒斥,隔离之苦。

上蔡县五龙孟庄一位妇女今年夏天确诊为艾滋病患者,结果全村家家户户齐买蚊香,天刚擦黑就在大门口点上,以防她家的蚊子飞过来。

更让人忧心的是在艾滋病人中间,也盛传着这样的谣言:“千万别暴露病情,暴露了也不能上大城市,到大城市里打了一针就给打死了。”

就记者几天来所接触到的病人家庭看,无一不是家徒四壁,没有一家不欠债,没有一家能够买得起较贵重的药。不止一人对记者说,他们连治低烧拉肚子的药也买不起。

难道他们真的只能坐以待亡?

还有两个让人担心的现实。

豫东豫南一带几十个县市个个是劳务输出大县,全县总人口动辄超过百万,每个县每年都要有十万、数十万的劳动力流向东西南北全国各地。他们中间有无艾滋病毒携者没有人作过统计,对这一地区的劳务人员如何管理,如何控制病毒再传播,是个亟待解决的问题。

此外,这一艾滋病高发区内,色情行业屡禁不绝。在上蔡县委,县政府的两个招待所里,每晚都有“三陪女”拨打骚扰电话,前来给陈楼村民抽血化验的桂希恩教授对此痛心疾首。纵贯河南省南北的107国道新乡段和驻马店段以色情服务闻名全省,屡打不尽之下,河南省防疫站在这两个地方搞了两个“行为干预试点”。

这两个问题解决不好,后果可想而知。

(文中艾滋病严重的村庄,艾滋病人皆为化名)

### THREE-YEAR-OLD AIDS VICTIM

(*Southern Weekend* November 11, 2000)

#### 3岁的小艾滋病人

再见到王为军令人大吃一惊,一个帅小伙儿落魄得像个在逃犯,他一年多来没有理发剃须,长发夹杂着些许银丝,他对记者说:“我现在等着当地政府什么时候能给我说句公道话!”

记者去年曾采访过他,由于众所周知的原因,在当时的报道中他化名张树清。

如今他的遭遇在当地已尽人皆知:爱人生孩子后,医院给她输了卖血人的血,爱人1999年死于艾滋病,留下两岁的女儿,是艾滋病毒携带者。医院只承认非法采血,不承认因此使王妻感染艾滋病。与此同时,当地不断发现新的艾滋病毒感染者,正如一年前采访时一位防疫站站长所说,由于血液管理长期混乱,对艾滋病传播监控不力,暴露出来的仅仅是冰山一角。

记者发现,本报去年12月3日头版报道中的另一家受害人(去世产妇的丈夫宗和平,他也被传染了艾滋病),在索赔无望,受人歧视的绝境中,陷入对社会的讽狂报复——宗在长途贩运途中,尽可能多地将艾滋病毒传染给其他人。

相比之下,王为军几乎还算“幸运”,在一连串徒劳而屈辱的上访之后,北大妇女法律援助中心免费帮他打官司,10月18日,一审在邢台市中级法院开庭。王为军说,医院院长王顺英始终微合双眼,她没想到自己会站在被告席上。

时隔一年,记者又来到王为军的家,王为军的女儿凯佳3岁了,依然娇憨可爱。王为军从衣柜顶层拿出爱人的遗像,说:“我偷偷拿出来,看看就放回去,不想让孩子看见。”

一年前采访时,王为军含泪问女儿想不想娘,女儿毫无反应。爱人生下孩子输血后“生怪病”一直到死,女儿是王为军一手拉扯的,已经忘记了“娘”这个生命中最重要称呼。如今,看到别的孩子有娘,女儿开始问“俺娘呢”,每到这时,王为军就把话岔开,爷爷则回答“上班走了”,孩子高兴起来:“上班挣钱,回来买新衣服!”

凯佳的生活里只有爸爸和爷爷,连同住一个院子里的叔叔伯伯都搬走了,王家和爱人家的亲戚在当地倍受歧视,虽然王为军本人并没有感染,也是人见人躲。他上访到省妇联,还没说话就被推出门外,有人说把这孩子弄死算

了,爷爷质问:“这病,是她自己愿意得的?孩子她妈不在了,就不能让这孩子多活几天?”

这一切,小凯佳浑然不觉,没意识到为什么小朋友都不跟她玩,为什么活动空间除了家里就只有门前50米长的巷子。她最高兴的事是上街花一毛钱买糖吃,人家连钱都不要,给她两块糖打发走,给她两块糖打发她快走。本报报道后,不少好心人寄来布娃娃,小衣服、北京理工大学学生黄秀猛寄来40元钱。

王为军害怕女儿长大,说:“越大明白的事越多,妈妈去世,她自己的病,我都没法跟她解释。”也许孩子等不到明白的那一天,等不到官司胜诉,获得赔偿的那一天。据诊断过凯佳的一名医生介绍,孩子5岁之前最容易发病,基本上活不到10岁。对此,王为军不敢想,说:“我只想她天天能高兴就行。”

南方周末

南方日报报业集团

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## NINE MEDIA HOUSES SUED FOR INFRINGEMENT OF RIGHTS

(*Southern Weekend* January 18, 2000)

### 九家媒体被诉侵权

1998年3月27日,本报一版头条报道,主要内容如下:齐齐哈尔市帐篷厂厂长李淑琴在帐篷厂工人大量下岗,企业极端困难的情况下,却大肆报销吃喝招待费,医药费;李淑琴未经厂职工代表大会同意,擅自批准齐齐哈尔市一家房地产开发公司拆扒帐篷厂厂房,出卖职工利益;向市二轻局先后两次上缴管理费12.5万元;李淑琴以儿子李静涛的名义,从厂里提走18万元;职工代表会投票罢免李淑琴,民主选举新厂长;李淑琴的儿子带人到厂里威胁;民主选举厂长后,该厂连卖续发生三起血案,三起血案都与厂长候选人和活跃分子有关;帐篷厂上级主管部门,市二轻局在处理帐篷厂发生的一连串问提时态度不积极....

本报记者 郭国松

### 群众来信作为诉讼证据

这篇报道发表后,一系列触目惊心的事实,在社会上引起强烈反响。

"齐市市委、市政府高度重视,主要领导亲自批示,责成市纪委、市政法委牵头组织成立了市委联合调查组,对报上所涉及到的有关问题及帐篷厂等有关部门进行调查。"并很快形成了长达30多页的《关于〈南方周末〉报刊载的〈工人投票罢免厂厂长齐齐哈尔连发三起血案〉文章所涉及问题的调查报告》(下称"调查报告")。

期间,一位看到报道的外地读者写信给齐齐哈尔市委主要领导,对发生在帐篷厂的种种怪事提出批评意见,1998年5月8日,这位领导大笔一挥,在信上批示道:"转二轻局作为起诉佐。"

三天后的5月11日,已被职工投票罢免的原帐篷厂厂长李淑琴向哈尔滨市中级人民法院提起诉讼,将该文作者戴煌、《南方周末》报社、齐齐哈尔市帐篷厂、《黑龙江日报》社、《黑龙江晨报》社、《黑龙江价格信息报》社、《中华周末报》社(北京)、《中国老年报》社(北京)一并告上法庭,要求"确认上述被告对原告构成名誉侵权";"赔偿损失100万元"。

李淑琴在诉讼列出七条"侵权"事实,对整篇报道全部予以否定。

1998年7月11日,齐齐哈尔市二轻局也向哈尔滨中院起诉,要求"确认被告对原告构成侵权,";"停止侵害,恢复名誉,消除影响,赔礼道歉,赔偿损失100万元"。被列为被告的还有另3家媒体。

2000年1月12日、13日,哈尔滨市中级人民法院分别开庭审理李淑琴母子和齐市二轻局诉戴煌及9家媒体"名誉侵权"案。

### 为"名誉权"要价100万

作为被罢免的原帐篷厂厂长,李淑琴何以能为自己的"名誉权"开出100万元的天价?

1997年6月17日,李淑琴被齐市二轻局任命为帐篷厂厂长兼党总支书记,到11月初被厂职代会罢免为止,前后,"执政"不过4个半月。

李淑琴上任后所干的最大的一件事便是对帐篷厂进行拆迁,但是,对于这关系到全厂职工利益的重大决策,李淑琴在没有获得职工代表大会一致同意和授权的情况下,擅自同意开发商对工厂进行拆扒,导致工人多次集体到市委,市政府上访、静坐,李淑琴至今仍认为,这是经过集体研究同意的。

李下台后,帐篷厂对拆扒工厂的房产开发公司提起诉讼,1999年6月10日,黑龙江省高院"经审理查明.....1997年9月末开发公司在未取得合法手续、拆迁许可证及没与帐篷厂达成动迁安置协议的情况下,对帐篷厂1189.93平方米房屋进行拆迁。"此事以开发公司向帐篷厂补偿40万元而告终。

1997年10月6日,在几经交涉无效的情况下,帐篷厂职代会贴出了罢免李淑琴的公告,据该厂职工反映,从9月份开始,厂房被拆,工人们四处上访,企业实际上已处于瘫痪状态,到罢免李淑琴的公告贴出时,全厂基本停产。

然而,李淑琴签字报销的"招待费"却如水银柱般直线上升--6月份527元,7月份1699元,8月份5772元,到10月份猛增到13000多元,同时,李淑琴还用出租厂房所得的租金支付吃喝费6000余元。

李淑琴在诉状中说:"在厂内报销的招待费,有关部门已经多次审查没有问题。其中,报销的票据中没有一张的白条,全部都有两人以上签字或经财务科长签字,没有违反财经纪律。"

对这个问题,《调查报告》是这样认定的:"李淑琴在任职期间,....其余5586元公款用于厂内人员吃喝是错误的;用帐外资金支付李淑琴、.....,三人观鹤节期间的厂长奖金1500元也是错误的,对此,李淑琴应负主要责任。另1326.6元招待费无法认定其支出去向,李淑琴应负主要责任。对上

述 8412,6 元款项应由李淑琴及其有关人员承担,由市纪委收缴后上交市财政返还给帐篷厂。"

在医药费报销上,帐篷厂早在 1993 年,就已经做出规定,职工每人每月医疗费 3.5 元,在工资中支付,平时不再报销其他任何医疗费用。但李淑琴的医疗费却照报不误,仅 1997 年 1 月、5 月,李淑琴就报道销医药费 1688,38 元。

李淑琴在诉状中说:"所报医药费不是她在任时报销,而是其前任厂长在任时经其前任厂长分三次批准后报销。"

就是李淑琴所称的这个前任厂长,却从 1995 年任厂长至 1997 年调离帐篷厂时,先后报销医药费 5668,65 元。《调查报告》说:"曹 XX 在全厂职工都不报销医药费的情况下为自己报销药费是错误的。应全额收缴其所报销的医药费。"

就是这样的一任又一任厂长,齐市二轻局却在诉状中说:"六任厂长大都是品行良好的干部,尽管有个别厂长有时候存在一些问题,但瑕不掩瑜,尤其是最后一任厂长李淑琴,二轻局是经过认真考核研究的...."

### 还有更多的问题

帐篷厂作为一个集体小企业,从辉煌一步步走向破败,二轻局称"是计划经济向市场经济过渡过程中多种原因所致"。

时至 1997 年,帐篷厂已连年亏损和拖欠的银行贷款,职工工资等,总额达数百万元,大批工人被迫下岗,自谋生路。

在如此困境下,帐篷厂的当权者却在 1997 年 5 月慷慨地向二轻局上交 9 万元"管理费",同年 10 月底,李淑琴在即将被罢免之际,又向二轻局交纳 35000 元"管理费"。

这笔钱到哪里去了呢?《调查报告》认为:"市帐篷厂在职工放假,工资发放困难的情况下,向主管局缴还联社借款,主管局用合作事业基金(联社借款)26374,94 元发放了奖金,此做法是错误的,已违反了财经纪律。"

伴随这种不正常行为的还有以下一系列事实:

1、李淑琴之子李静涛"借"给厂里 18 万元现金。从帐篷厂的帐面上反映,经李淑琴批准,李静涛从 1997 年 5 月 31 日至 10 月 16 日,先后借给帐篷厂 18 万元,此后,李静涛以"3 分利"的高息,每月从厂里提取利息,总额到 19000 元。

2、1995 年 12 月 8 日,李淑琴通过当时的厂领导,将年仅 17 岁的儿子李静涛招工进厂,三天后转正定级。在此后的 6 个月时间内,李静涛连升三

级工资,连进厂之前的司机培训费 2590 元也在厂里报销了。此时,帐篷厂职工已在大量下岗。

当帐篷的最后一辆车被拉去顶帐后,李静涛被"借调"到二轻局,给局领导开车,工资由帐篷厂支付。原报道说是给局长张云学开车,市委调查组说"此车为二轻局副职领导工作用车。"

3、1996 年 2 月 14 日,李淑琴的丈夫因病死亡,此前,李为其夫在帐篷厂代办了简易人身保险,保险公司因投保不足 6 个月而拒绝赔付保险金。李淑琴认为"是厂财务人员没及时到保险公司办理手续,给耽误了,此钱应由工厂负责。"李随后在帐篷厂支出保金 2020 元。《调查报告》说:"李淑琴违反规定,在工厂支付保金是错误的,应全额收缴,并应追究其责任。"

4、原报道引述帐篷厂职工的意见说,二轻局任命李淑琴为厂长,未履行职工代表大会讨论通过这一法定程序。二轻局说:"从局党委任命李淑琴为帐篷厂厂长整个过程看,我们认为是认真的,符合《中华人民共和国城镇集体所有制企业条例》和组织程序,不存在不合法问题。"

《调查报告》认为:"在李淑琴任帐篷厂厂长问题上,市二轻局党委没有严格贯彻集体企业条例。"

### 民选厂长到底惹急了谁

1997 年 10 月 29 日,帐篷厂召开职工代表大会,顺利地选出了以郭志得为厂长的新一届领导班子。

就在选举厂长的当天上午,李淑琴的大儿子李静波(原报道误为李静涛,经查系笔误,在此表示歉意)带着几个人来到厂里,他当着工人的面大喊:"谁叫郭志得?出来!"帐篷厂当即向公安机关报案。

郭志得退下阵来。

第二轮选举结束,43 岁的刘敏霞接任厂长,一场血腥顷刻降临到她和另两人身上。

1997 年 12 月 18 日晚,5 名歹徒破门而入,将刘敏霞和丈夫以及 14 岁的孩子击倒在血泊中,一番打砸后扬长而去;1998 年 1 月 14 日,上访和民主选举厂长冲在最前面的退休老工人郭荫范外出未归,他的老伴张秀云被砍死在自己家中;2 月 25 日晚,帐篷厂干部李忠欣回家途中,被 5 个歹徒拦住,身中 10 刀,险些丧命。

调查组说:"26 日上午 11 时犯罪嫌疑人即被抓获,此案(李忠欣)告破。这伙抢劫团伙在 25 日晚共作案 5 起,未发现案犯与帐篷厂选举厂长一事有任何联系,报载严重失实。"



记者为此专程采访了大难不死的李忠欣。他拿起一件满是刀口的黑色皮衣说：“我当时连中数刀，头上脸上都是血，昏死过去，醒来后发现被从路中间拖到了路旁的水沟里，身上的BP机和几百元现金，什么都没丢，绝对不是打劫。”

郭荫范老伴被杀一案，调查组引述警方的话说，郭家二女儿的前夫贺凌瑞具有重大作案嫌疑。1998年10月28日，贺凌瑞被逮捕，紧接着，当地媒体报道了此案被侦破的消息。

没想到，当法院开庭审理该案时，贺凌瑞当庭翻供。1999年11月23日，齐齐哈尔市中级人民法院下达刑事裁定书，“准予撤诉机关齐齐哈尔市人民检察院撤诉。”

然而，在本次庭审期间，李淑琴和二轻局的代理律师却当庭出示了一份由齐齐哈尔市公安局于1月10日（开庭前两天）出具的有关贺凌瑞一案“正在审理”的证明。

戴煌的文章仅仅是客观报道了这三起案件发生的事实，并没有说是何人所为，有关方面如此煞费苦心“求证”，称报道“失实”，实在令人费解！

至于刘敏霞一案，《调查报告》有一段话，不妨引述如下：“市公安局……决定对重点嫌疑人进行实质性接触、并同时采取技术侦察手段，发现了李淑琴有作案嫌疑的重要线索：4月3日下午调查与李关系密切的梁艳时，梁反映，在刘被打伤后的一天下午2点钟左右，李给她打电话让她去李的家中。梁去后她们在一起喝酒，谈话中李透露是她找人打的刘敏霞，原因是她的厂长被免，刘上任后还整她，这口气实在咽不下去，要教训教训她。那几个人干完后都乘通往北京方向的车走了。公安机关马上传讯了李淑琴和她的两个儿子，均拒不供认。”

### 纪委的案卷怎么到了被调查人手中

在连续两天的庭审中，原告李淑琴母子和二轻局将长达数百页的齐齐哈尔市纪检委的调查案卷搬到了法庭上，同时还有一份对该案卷综述的30多页的《调查报告》。

《调查报告》上写着“此件复印于齐齐哈尔市纪检委，盖有齐市纪检委的公章，落款是1998年6月29日。案卷材料上注明：“本卷内材料复印于齐市纪检委关于南方周末报导的调查材料卷宗，盖有市纪委”第一检查监察室”的内部公章，落款日期为：2000.1.6。

从卷宗上可以看到，这实际上是对李淑琴等人所涉及的问题进行调查的案卷材料，其中包括二轻局。案卷中有大量的反映李淑琴等人问题的材料，在“被证明人”一栏中，有相当一部分是李淑琴、李静涛、李静波母子。

二轻局和李淑琴母子作为被调查对象，齐市纪检委居然将调查案卷交到了被调查人手上，此事引起了旁听的中央及当地多家传媒记者的关注。

同时，戴煌及本报代理人当庭指出，齐齐哈尔市二轻局作为行政机关，不存在名誉权问题。理由是：

1. 行政机关与公民不是平等的民事主体，公民对行政机关提出批评，是宪法赋予的不可剥夺的政治权利，不属于民法调整的范畴。本案中的原告二轻局作为行政机关，从职能上讲是以国家拨给的行政经费作为它行使行政职权的费用，而只有当它以此经费作为支付手段，从事与机关活动所必须的商品交换的时候，它才处于民事法律关系当中，享有民事权利，承担民事义务，与交易的对方处于平等地位。

2. 行政机关没有要求名誉侵权赔偿的法律基础。名誉权是民事主体享有的一项人身权，民事权益的存在是民法保护的基本前提。侵权责任的成立，必须同时具备四个条件：侵权行为，主观过错，损害后果以及侵权行为与损害后果之间的因果关系。民事赔偿必须以民事权益损害结果的存在为前提。

显然，社会舆论对行政机关任何形式的评价，都不能够导致其财产损失，也不妨碍它继续行使权力。没有民事权益的损害结果，就不存在承担民事责任的问题。原告二轻局始终无法举出任何证据证明其财产损失数额，即充分说明 100 万元的所谓“名誉损失费”是毫无根据的无理要求。

## STATE-OWNED COAL MINES: DIFFICULTIES BEYOND SECURITY

(*Southern Weekend* August 1, 2002)

### 国有煤矿:安全之外的困境

2002年6月20日上午9时15分,黑龙江鸡西矿业(集团)公司属下城子河煤矿发生严重瓦斯爆炸事故,以115个生命的罹难击碎了一些人对国有煤矿生产安全的乐观看法;它在炸塌护棚支架、炸毁煤井巷道的同时,也以一种非常的方式,将国有煤矿安全之外的困境公之于众。

#### 115个煤矿工之死

2002年6月26日,29岁的矿工孙奎芳之妻吴金艳显然还没有从飞来横祸中清醒过来。她坐在炕上,不说话,也不动,失神的眼睛只是盯着一个地方看。

6天前那个下雨的清晨,她的丈夫孙奎芳起床后,草草吃了点东西,拿起一把伞,就去下井了。两小时后,井下一声巨响,丈夫就被埋在800多米深的地下。她再也见不到他了。

她同样再也见不到哥哥吴成林了,哥哥和丈夫死在一起。

她同样再也见不到其他113名煤矿工了,他们都死在一起。

在这次事故中遇难的还有集团公司的总经理、矿长、书记。一位工作人员说:"我们的总经理、矿长、书记就是因为检查安全生产,才死在了井底下,能说我们不重视安全吗?"

的确,近年来,矿山事故此起彼伏,意外爆炸声不绝于耳,来自上层的指令与追究措施一个接着一个,早已在行业内形成草木皆兵的气氛,作为国有老矿,鸡西矿业集团公司也身处其中。更何况,就在"6.20"事故前两个月的4月8日,该公司下属的东海矿已经发生一起重大瓦斯爆炸,24人死亡。

此次遇难的总经理赵文林,在当地享有非常高的声誉。关于他在安全生产方面的举措,典型的说法是这样的:

他在上任第一天去的第一个单位是国家安全生产监督管理局鸡西办事处,批示的第一个文件是有关安全生产的,召开的第一个会议是安全会议,直到6月20日早上,他先是在滴道矿处理井下着火,没吃早饭接着又赶到城子河矿,下了井,而根据电视录像记录,他说的最后一句话也和安全有关。

公司党委宣传部副部长刘维久称赵文林是“安全专家”。这位安全专家最为人称道之处是强令部下到井下办公。他给自己定下每个月下井 12 次的指标,而 10 个矿 106 名矿级领导分别是 18 次、24 次。公司专门为此成立一个“干部入井考核领导小组”,定期在集团内部的矿工报上公布,并对违规者扣除奖金。

刘维久说,强令领导下井的目的,一是促产量,二是保安全。

所以很难说鸡西矿业集团公司和各煤矿不重视安全。同样,也很难说矿工缺乏安全意识。“下井三分险”,这是矿区妇孺皆知的道理,“三块石头夹块肉”的危险,也只有矿工们体会最深。

据了解,国家安全生产监督管理局鸡西市办事处在今年 2 月至 6 月,先后 5 次检查城子河煤矿,每次都发现问题,都提出停产整顿,但无一例外,五次都没能落实。就在发生瓦斯爆炸的西二区,145、140、801、804 四个采煤和掘进面都已查出安全隐患;6 月 10 日,爆炸前 10 天又有一次检查,并且再次发出停产整顿通知书,矿长刘永金(已遇难)还签了字,但是,生产依旧照常进行。

### 煤矿工的艰难生活

鸡西矿业(集团)公司属下有 10 个矿区,聚居着 7 万名矿工以及他们近 40 万的妻儿老小。根据 2001 年黑龙江省经贸委的一份调查报告所披露,“贫困户达 3.8 万户,其中特困户 1.3 万户”,按照相关标准,家庭人均收入不足 100 元,可定为贫困户;不足 70 元,就是特困户。

对此,矿上一位干部不以为然,他说:“不是说得多了,而是说得少了。”

这位三十出头的干部 15 年前就已是城子河煤矿的工人,最令他难忘的是,1996 年和 1997 年,两年里他只领过四次工资,加在一起不到 1200 元,也就是说,平均每月不足 50 元。

那份报告还透露,至 2000 年,鸡西矿务局“累计拖欠职工工资 3.7 亿元,平均拖欠 18 个月,最长的 48 个月”。但 6 月 28 日下午,鸡西矿业集团副总经理姜明告诉记者,拖欠最长的不是 48 个月,而是 60 个月。

### 透视安全之外的困境

6 月 28 日,公司副总经理姜明说,连年的亏损,造成公司在安全、生产、生活三个方面都有欠帐,而且很严重。

生活欠帐:1991 年以来,开始拖欠职工工资,至 2000 年,已经累计拖欠 4 亿元左右。

生产欠帐:1994年以来,基本上停止了设备投资,现在有三分之二的设备严重老化,所用设备相当于20世纪六七十年代的水平;截至2000年4月底,井下掘进欠尺高达17万多米,这等于近两年时间没有搞掘进;许多矿井已经深入地下800米,接近了煤矿业采掘的极限。

安全欠帐:过去全公司每年有近3000万元的安全保护设施投入,但近几年几乎分文未投,许多安全设备年久失修,目前安全欠帐累计1.5亿元。

而公司要维持生产,要有效益,就得有足够的产量,就必须不断加大生产任务。城子河矿今年初自报年产量是120万吨,集团公司在全面均衡后,又"分配"过来20万吨,变成了140万吨。而全公司去年产煤700万吨,职工只是开始领到工资,"吃上了饭",今年的目标是达到800万吨,只有这样才能"吃饱饭",而明年的目标是900万吨,那样就能"吃好饭"了。

相应地,在二道河子矿,每月产煤7万吨,只够井下工人的工资,达到了9万吨,全体职工才能领到工资。矿党委书记车永年无奈地说:"我们每个月25日以前的煤全是给别人挖的,25日以后这五六天的3000吨煤才是自己的工资钱、吃饭钱。"

由此带来的连锁反应是:在采掘进度相对稳定的情况下,煤矿只好增加工作面,造成采掘、运输、通风等设备超负荷运转。事后的调查也印证了这一点。而对于城子河矿井底下的这些设备,从集团到各矿,上下一致的说法是,超期服役,老牛破车,将就着用。

但是由于多年来效益滑坡,原有的职工队伍流失殆尽。一份资料称,"井下采掘工人招不进,稳不住,以前尚能从贵州、云南、四川及山东沂蒙山区招来协议工,由于拖欠工资,又都走了;多数井下采掘队,30岁以下的职工已很难找到,连团支部都组建不起来。"

这样,一方面矿上养着大量职工家属,一方面一线工人却不得不大量雇用农民工或者"外包工"。

专门过来给儿子料理后事的孙连玉一边抽着自卷的烟卷,一边埋怨现在国有煤矿内部"外包工"太多,"老板太多,老板用人也随便","什么人都能下井,管理不正规"。

据知情人透露,6月20日遇难的115人中,像孙奎芳、吴成林这样的"外包工"共有32人。

煤矿和承包老板使用外包工,惟一的也是最重要的原因是外包工成本低廉。他们和外包工之间是纯粹的雇用与被雇用的关系,实行简单的计件工资,外包工挖出多少煤,就付出多少现钱,除此之外,双方没有其他关系。而使用正式工,则要考虑各项福利待遇,矿上甚至要养他一辈子。

外包工其实只是国有煤矿数量更多的农民矿工的一部分。矿井底下究竟有多少农民矿工,一位名叫郭升明的矿工说,谁也搞不清楚,"产量高了,呼

啦啦来一批;产量下去了,又呼啦啦跑掉一批,估计应该占全部矿工的三分之二以上。”

直接以赚钱为目的的外包矿老板,来去自由、管理松散的外包工,人数众多的农民工,这些非常规因素的存在,暴露出城子河煤矿经营管理和用工制度的混乱,而这就是事故发生的必然因素!

这就是一个百年国有老矿的生存现实。面对这一现实,黑龙江省经贸委去年就在一份调查报告中下过这样的结论:“生产安全形势十分严峻,不发生重大事故带有很大的侥幸成分。”

但是,面对“6.20”鸡西矿难,如果脱离了国有煤矿所面临的两难困境、脱离了煤矿工人多年来的窘迫生存,所做出的分析与结论,即便不是简单片面的,也有违情理和常规。

### 为国有煤矿把把脉

在谈起国有煤矿所面临的问题时,业内一位资深人士显得忧心忡忡。他说,作为固定资产高达59亿的特大企业,鸡西矿业集团经过国家煤炭产业政策若干次调整后,便一天天衰败下来。和鸡西一起衰败的国有煤矿还有不少,它们面临着和鸡西一样的问题。

作为最早进入计划经济并且一直严重依赖计划经济的煤炭产业,企业办社会就是它最大的弊病!

刘维久说,除了火葬场、检察院,社会上所有部门机构,鸡西煤矿上全有:中学小学,大大小小的医院,煤矿还要办环保,要搞森工,搞建筑等等。

在计划经济时代,每建一座矿井,在招收矿工时,煤矿同时要考虑家属及子女的生活问题,农村户口的要转成城镇户口。这种政策给职工带来了一些好处,但给企业带来的是难题。大批矿工家属拥入矿区,他们原本有房住、有地种、有饭吃,但是到了矿区后,就变成了煤矿的负担。

为了安排职工家属及子女就业,几乎所有的国有煤炭企业都开办了大量的中小企业,而办这些企业的时候,很少考虑经济规律和经济效益,单纯是为了安置人员。实事求是地说,这些中小企业根本不具备市场竞争和生存能力。

有关专家指出,这实质上是把农业的负担转嫁给了煤矿。

其次是产业科技化水平太低,还是依靠原始的人海战术。

有关资料显示,1996年,国有重点煤矿原煤生产全员效率为1.9吨/工,世界排名最低。

目前的国有煤矿基本上属于以传统技术为基础的劳动密集型产业,采煤装备只有一部分达到了世界上先进采煤国的70年代末期水平,大多还停留在别人五六十年代的水平上,科技对经济效益的贡献率仅为23%,低于全国

工业企业的平均水平。据统计,1998年,国有煤炭采选业的全员劳动生产率为12958元/人·年,远远低于全国工业的31347元/人·年的平均水平。

目前,一个国有矿井基本上有3-4个采区,6-8个采煤队,10-12个开掘队。采区分散,战线长,造成了设备多、用人多、投入大、效率低。

第三是成本太高,市场竞争力弱。

由于冗员过多,开采期长,以及设备老化,国有煤矿的吨煤开采成本一直居高不下。

以鸡西为例,在1998年年产520万吨的情况下,吨煤成本高达160元,是小煤井成本价的三至四倍,在激烈的市场竞争中,别人卖130元/吨就能赚钱了,而他们每生产1吨煤却要亏损30元。即便是现在,他们的成本也在100元以上,这样的成本,别说和小煤窑竞争,就是和一些新兴的国有大矿相竞争,也处于劣势。

除了上述原因,根据有关专家说,国家的相关政策对国有煤矿的发展也产生了巨大影响。

1993年以前,大型国有煤矿的亏损由国家补贴;1993年提出煤炭价格放开,3年之内砍掉60亿元亏损补贴,但是用煤的电力、钢铁和运煤的铁路3个部门,一家也没放开,最终结局是煤价没上去,亏损补贴也没了。

而此时小煤窑则异军突起,具备了左右市场的能力。国有煤矿自此与小煤窑开始了无休止的遭遇战。

1998年7月,国务院决定将94个国有重点煤矿(直属原国家煤炭部)以及原随煤矿上收的206个企事业单位、2379亿元资产、320万职工和133万离退休人员,全部纳入地方政府管理。而有关资料显示,这94家国有重点煤中,当时共有81家亏损,亏损面为86%,其中鸡西矿务局的亏损挂帐额是17.6亿。

现在,国家采取每年下达亏损指标的政策,比如鸡西矿业公司去年的亏损指标是2.89亿元,它的总亏损额只要不超过2.89亿,就算扭亏为盈。然而,鸡西连这个目标也难以实现。

但是,在国家煤炭经济运行中心博士潘伟尔看来,这样的政策作用寥寥:"今年可以给两亿,明年也可以给3亿,后年怎么办?这样不能解决根本问题啊。"

## 国有煤矿何去何从

世界上几乎所有产煤国家的煤炭行业都是亏损的。德国为了保证就业,政府出资补贴煤矿;法国的吨煤成本高达200美元,远远高出煤炭进口价格,遂决定2005年退出煤炭行业;而日本则在今年上半年关闭了全国最后一

口煤井。那么,中国的国有煤矿该向哪个方向走呢?这是我们必须思考的问题。

据记者了解,在煤炭行业"十五"规划中,列在第一位的就是组建集团龄公司,加快国有煤矿向现代企业转变。

当然,谁都知道,这是政府的倡导,也是企业的出路,但现实很残酷,国有老矿蜕变成现代企业显然困难重重。就在去年的8月28日,鸡西矿务局一举变成鸡西矿业集团公司,但6月28日,副总经理姜明说:"我们就是翻了个牌子而已。仍然是国有独资,没有多元投资,怎能叫现代企业?当然我们也希望有人入股,但是你说,就我们企业这个样子,有人愿意吗?"

潘伟尔博士认为,和石油、天然气一样,煤炭是一种重要的战略资源,我们国家因为不缺少煤炭,所以很多人忽视它,自90年代初以来,就一直把煤炭行业当作竞争性产业,忽视了它的基础产业职能。相较于日本先后九次制定煤炭政策,我们国家目前亟须做的事情是,尽快形成一套将煤、水、电等能源整合于一体的战略性的宏观政策体系。

## 资料

2002年1月至5月份,全国煤矿企业共发生死亡事故1331起,死亡2341人,其中国有重点煤矿发生死亡事故228起,死亡397人;国有地方煤矿(包含基建)发生事故233起,死亡360人;乡镇煤矿发生死亡事故870起,死亡1584人(其中,集体煤矿发生141起,死亡317人,个体煤发生729起,死亡1267人)。(资料来源:国家安全生产监督管理局)



## Summary

The hegemonic role of the Chinese media is to serve as the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party. This assignment has given journalists a central role in the party-state's propaganda and thought work. Central to this top-down function was the journalists' ability to communicate the party line to the people, inspire a positive atmosphere and contribute to the creation of a socialist society. In this context, the CCP leadership conceived of social problems as 'negative news' which were to be limited in the public sphere.

In the Mao era the media was an integrated part of the party-state, but as a consequence of the economic reform process, the media has acquired more financial and administrative freedom. Marketization and competition has led to diversification in the media field: entertainment, consumer information and human interest-stories have become part of the media discourse. New information technology contributed further to the diversification of the emerging media market in China in the 1990s, and the growth in critical and investigative journalism, in particular within parts of the print media has been one result of this development.

This dissertation focuses on critical and investigative journalism in the press, in particular as it appeared in the newspaper *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang Zhoumo*) around the turn of the millennium. Through interviews with journalists and analysis of newspaper articles a new media discourse is identified: this discourse is characterized by an emphasis on social problems, such as corruption, environmental problems, severe accidents and AIDS. The critical and investigative journalism challenges the

mouthpiece role of the Chinese media. Through their discursive strategies, critical journalists contribute to carving out a new political role for the Chinese media. This role is a product of journalists' attempt to increase their autonomy, and of their wish to provide marginalized people with a bottom-up channel of communication.

However, the development of critical journalism also reflects the party-state's wish to utilize new media discourses, while containing the perceived negative impact of critical exposures upon social stability. The result is that the media acquires a conditional autonomy where the party-state retains the controlling power. Journalists cannot openly defy the party-state's regulations, but through their discursive strategies they push the boundaries restricting what they can write about. A discourse analysis of *Southern Weekend* articles shows that these texts are polyphonic, ambiguous expressions: on the one hand, they actively relate to the hegemonic mouthpiece discourse, but they also oppose it. The polyphonic features of critical and investigative newspaper articles offer a discursive advantage in a controlled media environment, because the ambiguity makes possible different interpretations while decreasing the likelihood of sanctions being imposed by the propaganda authorities.

The Chinese party-state's control over the media means that overt challenges are dangerous: news organizations can be closed down and journalists risk imprisonment. However, during the last two decades critical and investigative journalism has become part of the Chinese public sphere, and it has achieved a conditional autonomy. Through polyphone texts and careful discursive strategies, journalists have succeeded in expanding the boundaries of the public sphere, and this contributes to a new political role for the Chinese media.