

## Introduction

Textbooks suggest that any research project has to start from a theoretical basis; that is true and it is not. Once the undertaking turns scientific, a theoretical starting point is indispensable - yet before science begins, there is a startling moment of surprise, in which you realize that something is not the way you thought it to be, and you are at a loss to explain why it differs so widely from your expectations. It is only then that science claims its share in the process, calling for theories under which the specific phenomenon in question can be subsumed, and for methods that can be applied to verify or falsify certain well-defined hypotheses. In this case, the moment of surprise resulted from daily newspaper-reading during a year-long stay in China, when I found several papers to differ from each other in regard to their content: Some boasted of the country's achievements and the virtues of the communist party in virtually every single article. Others contained a considerable number of articles that would depict the country's social or economical problems, report on law suits against corrupt officials, or voice concerns of citizens about bad schools or environmental pollution. This was a puzzling discovery, as it conflicted with the common understanding of a Leninist press system expected to strictly control and streamline media coverage. Research articles I read in order to better understand the phenomenon only further roused my curiosity: of course I was not the first person on earth to observe these differences, whose nature was subject to a heated debate among Western and Hong Kong media scholars analyzing China's media landscape: While many try to establish a link between the newly emerging differences and the transformation processes China's economy, society, and polity is experiencing, viewing the growing diversity as a factor that might help pushing for democratic reforms in the near future, others are much more skeptical, suggesting that it is a process intended only to improve the state's economical performance well controlled by the party.

What is beyond any doubt, however, are the following facts: The media system is in a state of flux, because the old system was too expensive and the economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s offered new opportunities: The state had financed thousands of dailies that often reached only a tiny audience and were mostly read in offices (that were obliged to subscribe) to while away the time. Since 1988, the government made several attempts to reduce the number of papers relying on subsidies and make media units themselves responsible for profits and losses. That was, however, only possible because since the early 1980s advertisement became an ever stronger factor for media income that could replace state subsidies - if, by turns, the papers reached an audience large enough to be targeted by the advertisement industry. This is where unintended consequences of the reform came into play: The leadership had planned to

curtail costs in order to spend the money on more pressing enterprises, not to change the style and the content of their media. Yet this is what happened since many papers could no longer rely on guaranteed monthly allocations, but were forced to attract more readers in order to raise their advertisement income: So these papers did change their style (lay-out and language) and topics (writing more about issues readers would really be interested in), while those papers still enjoying state subsidies kept to the old penetrating panegyric tune. This trend was already visible, if only very weak, in the 1980s, but gained much more strength when Deng Xiaoping overcame conservative resistance against intensified market reforms in 1992. Since that year, advertisement incomes soared annually, and more and more papers turned into market-oriented outlets, some of which were newly created by organizations or even (indirectly) by private investors. While prior to 1992 every city had only one readable general interest newspaper - the evening paper - and thus no market competition at all, at the end of the decade, there were half a dozen or more competing papers in every city.

The commercialization of the press and the unintended emergence of diversity are undisputed facts; yet, what do they mean for political developments in the PRC? Most students of the issue regard the media as a theatre of a greater battle: Considering the importance of the media for one-party rule, the overwhelming majority of scholars views changes in this sector in the light of the question, whether and how China is going to democratize. However, as I have sketched out above, there exist two rivaling interpretations of the role the media is likely to play in this regard: One emphasizes *change*. According to this view, growing economic pluralism (more editors, products, and consumer choices) necessarily leads to political pluralism (more diverse opinions expressed). A civil society growing more independent from the state and less homogenous than before will be reinforced by media contents that reflect conflicting interests as well as the variety of life-styles and world views. The rival interpretation emphasizes *continuity*. The party-state, in this view, is still well in control of the media system; economical changes do not spill over into the political realm, as the observed variety of contents is limited to minor issues only and does evade truly sensitive political problems. Papers are able to attract mass audiences by other than political issues - market success can also be reached on the basis of entertaining news and sensationalism. This interpretation concludes that whatever forces there are in favor of a democratization of the Chinese polity, the media is not among them.

That was the state of scholarly debate when I started my investigation. I found it deficient with regard to two aspects: First, most scholars more or less intuitively assumed either a positive or a negative correlation of media commercialization and democratization, but only few attempts

have been made to underpin the argument by referring to cases of transitional societies other than China. Which is the more surprising as the last three decades have witnessed plenty of transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy that involved a great variety of media systems. It should therefore be rewarding to compare these cases, and to gain some ground for a general theory of the impact of the media on transformation processes by way of abstraction. The analysis of the Chinese case would be more sound if it were placed within the framework of such a general theory obtained from empirical evidence.

The second flaw of recent research on the issue is the disparity between the abundance of quantitative statements being made and the scarcity of available quantitative data to corroborate them. While both interpretations would agree that the variety of published opinions has increased to a certain degree, they surely differ over the question of its extent. Some scholars, for instance, maintain that there was "much more" critical reporting in the papers now than in the 1980s, while others state that criticism still held only a "tiny share". Statements that operate with categories of quantity (much, more, little, frequent, seldom) are frequently the foundation of the overall assessment, yet they are seldom - if ever - defined: How much is "much"? And what is the standard by which to call a phenomenon "more frequent"? And, to add an even more fundamental short-coming: What is the data basis of the statements? Is it the subjective impression after flipping through half a dozen of randomly selected papers? That would obviously be no adequate basis for drawing a scientific conclusion. Yet no scholar concerned with this issue has come up with data obtained in a methodically acceptable way such as to substantiate his or her claims.

This thesis therefore intends to improve our understanding of the current changes in China's media system by contributing quantitative data framed within a theory of the media's role in political transition processes.

The question it seeks to answer is if the commercialization of the press since 1992 has led to substantial political differences between the contents of daily newspapers.

The thesis consists of five chapters:

1. Theory: The first chapter provides an overview of the existing approaches to analyze the interplay of media and democracy in transitional societies, and tries to integrate them into a single, comprehensive theoretical framework that shall guide the investigation. This framework includes five analytical categories that will be applied to discuss the political role of the media in the PRC according to research work by Chinese and Western authors. Having done this, the questions that have to be answered in order to make some progress in solving the

problem will become clearer: What we need to know is (1) if there is a significant, consistent, and objectively verifiable pattern of commercial papers distinguished from non-commercial papers in terms of politically relevant content to be discovered, and (2) if such differences can also be found between commercial papers.

2. Method: To answer these questions, we will apply a method that has been widely used to analyze media content in Western societies, but only very rarely (and inadequately in most cases) in the Chinese context: Quantitative Content Analysis. This method (1) provides objective and reliable results, as coding teams instead of a single researcher develop the category system used for analysis, and (2) allows quantification of media content, as the central political information contained in articles are encoded into countable numbers and frequencies. For the purpose of comparison, we will analyze two samples of newspapers: One that covers the period after the commercialization process has shown the effects that we found so puzzling (2001), and one of the time when the market had exerted only very slight influences (1992). The category set applied to analyze the papers' content will be so designed as to detect politically relevant factors such as article directions, frequency of sensitive topics, and criticism voiced against representatives of the party-state.

3. Results: In sum, the content of 224 newspapers containing more than 20,000 articles will be encoded into approximately 70,000 numbers. This chapter provides a first access to the data by selecting and grouping them. It is important to note that this step already contains a certain interpretative aspect, as both selection and grouping affords a decision as to which data exactly are considered important to the study and how they connect. Although interpretative elements cannot be totally shut off, explicit interpretation is not entered into before the next chapter.

4. Discussion: Here, data obtained from all categories are combined, and the results are assessed in the context of current political trends in the PRC, making use of research done on the various policy fields the articles pertain to. The discussion is subdivided into three sections: The first two are concerned with the first research question and interpret differences between party and commercial papers regarding national and international news, respectively. The third section deals with the second research question and interprets differences among commercial papers.

5. Conclusions: The last chapter aims at an overall assessment of the results. On this basis, it is possible to comment on and evaluate the implications of Chinese media commercialization for the prospects of the Chinese polity.

The thesis rests on four kinds of sources:

(1) Newspapers are of course the central object of the study. The chapter on method explains which newspapers have been selected for investigation and why. Apart from those papers included in the study, reading a far broader range of papers was a necessary prerequisite for a prudent selection. Those sources, although not explicitly mentioned, are an important backbone of the study as they contributed to the author's understanding of China's newspaper market.

(2) Western (English) literature on political developments in the PRC has been important to learn about the state-of-the-art research on China's media on the one hand, and to assess the results of our own study in the light of current political trends in the PRC on the other.

(3) Literature and surveys by scholars in mainland China proved to be of great value, too. Especially surveys on readership attitudes which have, until now, been largely performed by mainlanders only and which can be considered reliable. But research on certain other political issues also meet scientific requirements and partly provides valuable empirical evidence of political phenomena, for instance on problems of grass-root democracy in rural areas. While political impediments have to be kept in mind, there is no reason for the sheer negligence of Chinese political scientists so widely observed in Western writing about the PRC.

(4) Interviews with Chinese media scholars, editors, and journalists have been conducted in the summer of 2002 in order to obtain some genuine views from insiders. They were not meant as an extra survey (in sum, twelve interviews were conducted), but should rather help with the assessment of the results. Furthermore, I wanted to verify certain insider information that is sometimes quoted in research articles about China's media. For obvious reasons, these sources have to remain anonymous. This need for anonymity poses some difficulties, since a scientific text has to lay open all its sources for the sake of reliability, i.e. for enabling other researchers to check the basis of an argument and to understand why the author has come to his or her conclusions. The common practice to mask interviewees as "scholar A", "journalist B", etc., does serve neither of the two contradicting purposes: The source is not laid open to the scientific community, and if any ill-disposed effort would be made to trace a source, any indication to the interviewee's identity could be harmful. Even though it is highly unlikely that security or propaganda authorities rely on an (at least in their eyes) obscure European publication to detect leaks of information, we just refer to "interviews" when indicating that our source has been a personal communication.

These restrictions on free speech bring me to a last preliminary remark: A study concerned with the growing pluralism of the Chinese press might, to some outside observers, seem superfluous, maybe even cynical on the grounds that China is a country with basically no press freedom at all, when measured against most other countries in the world. On the press freedom index published by *reporters sans frontières*, China ranks last among the 139 countries under observation, scoring 97.0 on a scale ranging from 0 (totally free) to 100 (totally not free; the assessment is based on a questionnaire sent to "people with a real knowledge of the press freedom situation in one or more countries", such as local journalists, foreign correspondents, legal experts, or specialists on the region, see RSF 2004b). 23 Journalists and about 50 cyberdissidents were in jail in 2003 (RSF 2004a). In March and April the same year, a new wave of closures swept across the country, as several popular critical magazines and papers (Xinwen Zhoukan, Ershiyi Shiji Huanqiu, Nanfang Zhoumo) were banned or suffered reshuffles of their editorial boards (RSF 2004a). These facts should always be kept in mind while reading the present study. But the sad state of press freedom in the PRC notwithstanding, the new trends outlined above are worth to be examined. The sudden end of the Soviet empire disgraced Western social scientists; the crack in the wall was totally overlooked by some or at least mostly underestimated by those who did not. A closer look at micro-processes would have perhaps given rise to different and better prognoses. We should also consider the possibility of China evolving in a third way, neither transforming into a democracy by Western standards, nor remaining the suppressive dictatorship it is today. Authoritarian Singapore, for instance, seems to be an attractive model to some conservative thinkers on the mainland. Developments that point to a certain degree of liberalization stopping short from political liberty might be part of such a third way. They might give rise to further reforms that ultimately end in a genuine democratization process. Of course, they might as well stop at so early a juncture that the political system remains basically the same. Yet to understand and judge these developments, we need analyses more detailed than rankings.

The present study makes an effort to provide one.