

## V. Conclusions

The question this thesis aimed to answer was: Has press commercialization engendered the rise of a politically more differentiated newspaper market? The answer is, with certain qualifications: yes.

The thesis revealed that media content is no longer decided on solely by the party-state: Readers have gained considerable influence too. The audience has forced commercial papers to publish critical reports of an unprecedented frequency and of a quality not to be found in Chinese newspapers before commercialization had set in. Especially social disparities and corruption are topics the market-oriented papers feel pressed to report on. Moreover, market-oriented papers begin to develop specific profiles; we could distinguish features characteristic of different commercial papers: Some develop into prestige, others in tabloid papers; some take a rather pro-business stance, while others rather advocate workers' interests; some hold conservative views, others can be rated as rather liberal.

Of course, all these changes take place within a rigid political framework. Media content is still *attentively* controlled by the authorities. Yet their ability to also *effectively* control media messages is limited. Post-publication censorship is not able to prevent editors from publishing critical articles on new events, as long as they do not overtly violate central propaganda guidelines. Diffused authority over media content and de facto private publishing of papers has given editors considerable leeway.

The Chinese leadership seems to be aware of these trends as well. How do they react? Evidently, the Communist Party decided to ride the tiger: Having the choice between curbing market forces or using them, they choose the latter. The concentration of media units in a dozen large media companies will not only serve to increase the media's economic efficiency, but also facilitate media control, since chains of command will become more transparent, and the number of outlets will drop markedly. Second, the leadership has decided that party papers like those analyzed in this thesis (except for *People's Daily*) should be converted into commercial papers. Forced subscription and subsidies will disappear. The future party paper will resemble today's *Guangzhou Daily* very much: They will, on the one hand, contain the minimum amount of criticism necessary for a reader to take a paper seriously, and will turn to less obtrusive forms of propaganda. Yet on the other hand, they will be still conservative compared to other market-oriented papers, and will get the main ideological messages across maybe even more effectively than the party papers of the old days.

Moreover, I have shown that market-oriented papers do not necessarily hold liberal views. Some will do, if they think this strategy adequate to attract readers; yet parts of the readership will not take interest in critical reports. They will be taken care of by conservative or nonpolitical papers. Yet as long as the market share of liberal papers will be considerable, the existence of conservative or non-political ones will do no harm to the development of a newspaper landscape characterized by more content plurality than before.

My interviewees' assessment that this trend will grow ever stronger in the coming years has been corroborated by the findings of this study. Yet it is clear that it will not pass beyond a certain limit unless political conditions change. As long as there occurs no split in the party leadership, or no fifth, possibly more liberally-minded generation of leaders emerges in 2012, media companies will not be a direct agent of change in the PRC. Nevertheless, my findings suggest media commercialization to prepare some ground for a democratic outcome of the diffuse transformation process China is undergoing at present. This is for two reasons: (1) The increasing amount of critical reports will intensify the pressure on the CCP to reform the polity. Especially the frequent reporting on corruption cases will strengthen the wide-spread feeling that sweeping political reforms are the only efficient means to tackle the problem. (2) If political restrictions are lifted, the press will be better prepared to play a role as a watchdog of the government and a better supplier in different political views than it was ten years ago. The experience papers have gathered in this regard will pay off and make a transition towards a freer political system more likely.

I consider these aspects particularly important since the West must learn to understand that political changes in the PRC probably will not happen as swift as it did in Eastern Europe. At present, a gradual transformation initiated and held in check by the leadership seems more likely than mass protests leading to a democratic revolution. If we want to understand the chances of such gradual change, we have to carefully watch any process evolving in a similarly gradual way. The commercialization of the press is one of them. It is a force working in favor of political change, even if its full momentum is more latent than actual.

Although my findings strengthen those views emphasizing the political potential of economic changes, that dose not necessarily invalidate the opposite view: The political potential of the media can become actual only if the political framework is in flux. At least as far as the media is concerned, the economy is a substitute, not a driving force, for major political changes. Second, the effects of recent media reforms, first and foremost the launching of a dozen large media companies, can only be assessed in a couple of years. In the past, the Communist Party

has proved to be an ingenious master of *divide et impera* strategies to maintain power. I suggest that the analytical tools developed in this thesis should be applied again in, say, 2006 to assess the effects of this concentration process.