

II. Method

The aim of our study calls for a method that allows to describe newspaper content quantitatively. Such a method has been developed in the 1950s and 60s and is a widely used research technique in communication sciences today, Quantitative Content Analysis. The following introduction into the method is based on textbooks and articles outlining this methodology (Krippendorff, 1980: 57ff; Riffe/Lacy/Fico, 1998: 54ff; Stempel 1989: 126; Emmert 1989: 97ff; Kaid 1989: 198f; Holsti 1969: 119ff; Früh 1991: 24ff und 230ff; pages refer to the sections most relevant to the present study).

1. Quantitative Content Analysis

1.1. The basic idea

A good starting point to explain the method is a widely accepted definition given by Bernard Berelson: "Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson 1952: 18). As several scholars later advocated the concept of qualitative content analysis (see Altheide 1996), the method meant by Berelson is named Quantitative Content Analysis (QCA) since the 1970s. This method reduces the multitude of verbal expressions found in a text corpus to a manageable number of categories that can be counted and thus be compared quantitatively. The content of a newspaper might, for instance, be analyzed according to the topics dealt with in the articles, so that several articles are subsumed under one category (e.g. a report about the Middle East and one about a security council session might both be classed as "international news"). The technique of category building is at the heart of the method: In order to guarantee objectivity and reliability, the coding scheme is developed not by one researcher alone, but by a team: Starting from a first scheme that the researcher thinks to serve his purpose, two, three, or more coders will apply it independently to the texts under scrutiny. Only if all coders come up with fully or nearly congruent results, the coding scheme can be regarded as sufficiently reliable. This involves a repeated process of drafting and redrafting a scheme. No textbook offers a standard which defines when inter-coder consistency has been achieved, as the value will depend not at least on the subject of the respective investigation, but in most studies, 80% are considered respectable, and 90% fairly good. If such values are reached, the study can claim to be *objective* in Berelson's sense.

The strength of QCA thus lies in its capability of reducing a host of different verbal expressions into a systematic set of arguments or pieces of information in an objective way, so that

the core content of interest to given study becomes measurable. It therefore serves the purpose of the present study very well: The lack of objective, quantitative arguments about the political content of Chinese newspapers has been identified above as the major obstacle for the assessment of the papers' political role - QCA will enable us to obtain information on the frequency of politically relevant topics in different papers and of attitudes expressed in them (see below). Yet, before we outline the exact design of our study, it will be rewarding to discuss some limits of the method as well. It is also necessary to be aware of the pitfalls which may stand in the way of the scientific endeavor.

1.2. Problems of Quantitative Content Analysis

There are two possible mistakes that must be avoided when using QCA: (1) A lack of theoretical considerations that are essential both for the construction of a research design and for the interpretation of the data, and (2) technical short-comings in the application of the method that violate the central postulate of objectivity.

(1) Phillip Emmert (1989: 92) has observed that one - and not the least important - function of quantitative measurement is "not a respectable function. Quantification serves the function of making our science look more scientific." There is in fact a danger inherent in QCA to over-emphasize the gathering of data, while it is far from clear how these data relate to the reality they are intended to describe, or if they are relevant at all. Such research substitutes counting for thought. Any quantitative analysis therefore needs a strong *qualitative* element: It has to start from a clear idea what exactly the aim of the study is and why it is important. It must construct a set of categories that truly measure the phenomenon under scrutiny, and interpret the results in the light of the knowledge we have about the context of the texts that have been analyzed. The first step demands an analysis of the existing research done on the respective problem. Only then can an exact and relevant research question become clear. This is what I have done in the previous chapter. The second step, the construction of a valid category set, will be explained in this chapter, as I will relate each category to our research question and argue, (1) why the set I chose is apt to measure the political content of newspapers, and (2) why it allows a comparison of commercialized and not commercialized papers. Only then can meaningful numerical coding and counting start, the results of which will be presented in the third chapter. This is, however, not where the investigation ends: A fourth, again qualitative step is needed, the interpretation of the data in the light of the political context. Here, I will have to turn to information obtained by other studies using non-quantitative means to discuss

our results and draw correct conclusions. The quantitative procedure must therefore be embedded in hermeneutic approaches to reveal its full strength. Otherwise, QCA is only numbers, numbers, numbers.

(2) The other frequent mistake is that some QCA are considered objective even if the criteria mentioned above are not met. Especially research on the Chinese media often suffers from this problem (see the studies by Gu 1990, Klaschka 1991, Zeng 2000, Deng 2001). In all these cases, the authors did not develop their scheme in cooperation with a coding team and could thus not secure inter-coder consistency. Yet an analysis performed by one researcher alone is of course not objective, and abandons the one, yet decisive advantage QCA has compared to other approaches to understand a given set of texts. While claiming to have conducted quantitative content analyses, these studies are nothing but qualitative judgements clothed in numerical values.

Besides these potential deficits that the researcher himself would be responsible for, the application of QCA has certain *inherent* limits that cannot be passed beyond: As an analytical tool, the method is not very subtle; it reduces the nuances of language, its implicit meanings, allusions, styles, etc. to its propositional content. The strength of the method is its weak point at the same time: Because a coding scheme is considered valid only if it can be applied by several readers independently, contents have to be clearly defined and must be easy to identify. Evidently, such an analysis cannot exhaust the myriad of ways by which opinions can be expressed through language. This is a general problem, but the Chinese case is even more complicated; putting the question aside whether it is due to historical-cultural specifics or to the simple fact that voicing one's opinions in a frankly way is not allowed in a politically controlled press, the Chinese press is full of innuendo. Journalists have developed, and audiences have learnt to understand the art of saying what you mean behind the surface of a harmless story which cannot be censored. Especially foreign news coverage is an effective means of covertly criticizing domestic problems which was frequently used during the events of 1989 (when, for instance, the Hungarian prime minister was quoted saying that the use of the military to solve international problems was not permissible, or a headline ran: "Khomenei aged and in poor health: Who will succeed him?" (Tan 1993: 288; more examples can be found in Dittmer 1994: 42ff and Friedman 1994: 136). These days, it is mainly articles on corruption cases worldwide that are used to express hidden criticism, which emphasize the possibility of checking these abuses by institutional mechanisms or a critical press. History can also be a

good disguise for criticism: In 2003, the TV serial "On the Republican Path" was banned because the 19th century historical intrigues made too many allusions to an ossified political system and the need for democratic reforms (RSF 2004a).

Evidently, these hidden political messages are of great interest to any analysis of political communication in the PRC; they have to be traced by other than quantitative methods and belong to the context that the interpretation of quantitative data has to take into account. The same holds true for rather subtle differences in editorials: After Jiang Zemin's speech on July 1st, 2001, it was evident that more liberal papers like *Beijing Youth News* predominantly commented on his slogan to *explore new paths* (*chuang xin*), a woolly term that could mean almost everything, including political reform, which the *Beijing Youth News* editorials tried to suggest. Another example is the reaction of the press to Taiwanese considerations to hold a referendum on independence in 2002: Every paper was forced to condemn the plans, but the liberal *Southern Weekend* seized the opportunity to give a lengthy account of the historical roots and the political function of referenda and direct democracy - thereby rather advocating than condemning the concept. Yet none of these differentiations will be captured by a study employing QCA, as no category system is imaginable that would be capable of grasping such subtle differences.

These are qualifications we should keep in mind when applying the method to the Chinese press. All we can trace is the manifest, not the hidden content; however, contrary to the common notion that the hidden is more fascinating than the overt, the Chinese case is different: It has already become evident from various examples that hidden political messages can be expressed in Chinese newspapers; it is questionable, if this is unique in the Chinese case; innuendo and allusion also existed in the Soviet or in the East European press. Their existence therefore does not tell much about political changes underway. What is much more interesting to know is whether more manifest political differences are traceable in the Chinese press today. This would be truly unique because it was not the case in Eastern Europe, and would count as a prove that political and economic reforms are correlated.

I will now describe the design of this study and explain, why the categories chosen are adequate to measure the political content of papers and the influence of market-orientation. The complete coding scheme is given in the appendix.

2. Design of the study

Three questions had to be answered: Which newspapers have to be analyzed, so that market effects on the political content are traceable? What periods of time have to be examined so that

effects can be attributed to market reforms? Which categories have to be used so that differences concerning the political content become evident? The first two questions are concerned with the sampling of papers. They are answered in section 2.1., the third is dealt with in section 2.2.

2.1. Sampling

2.1.1. Newspaper sample

Creating the samples is a process driven by two often conflicting motivations: On the one hand, there is a wish to gather as wide and diverse a range of newspapers as possible. On the other hand, the limits time, money, and manpower set to the endeavor, cannot be ignored. At the start it was necessary to define the bottom line: Which requirements our sample would have to meet if it was to reveal data relevant to our question?

(1) It should represent papers of a varying degree of market-orientation

That means that the 2001 sample should cover two types of papers, those whose first and foremost purpose is to spread party propaganda and which are financed by forced subscription and subsidies, and market-oriented papers which entirely rely on individual subscription and street sales.

(2) I had to select two time periods that would allow conclusions about the impact media commercialization had on contents, one representing the present-day situation of a press divided into commercialized and non-commercialized papers, and a second, earlier period when market effects on newspapers had been much weaker. This earlier period that was meant to function as a sort of control group, would have to be marked by another characteristic: While the political conditions of the time in question would have to be similar to present-day China, this period should show a considerably lower level of commercialization so that changes could be attributed to economic change.

The time intervals had to be selected first; I intended to compare two periods of six months each, because half a year is a time span large enough for covering a sufficient number and variety of events in a relatively compact stretch of time (see 2.1.2. on sampling). As period number one, representing the present, six months of 2001 were to be picked, since I started research that year. The earlier period, that should serve as a comparative interval, had to meet two requirements: It had to be a period *different* to present-day conditions in economical terms, but *similar* in political terms (see above). Due to the political requirement, the interval

could not be earlier than the second half of 1992, because Deng's reform policy stood on firm ground again then after the democracy movement and conservative backlashes; since the middle of 1992, however, the general political framework of the PRC's polity and the outlines of most national policies, including the media, have been considerably stable. On the other hand, the interval could not be later than 1994 and 1995 when first signs of a changing media landscape appeared with the emerging of the so-called metropolitan newspapers, the internal reform of *Guangzhou Daily* and the success of *Beijing Youth News* (see p. 43f). Hence, the second time period must be chosen between the middle of 1992 and the year 1994. As a second indicator to decide which time period to choose exactly, we checked the increase of the total amount of advertisement income generated by the newspaper industry in the early 1990s, and found that the largest increase took place in 1993 (Sun Y. 2002: 216). This led to the decision to select the earliest possible period for comparison, i.e. the second half of 1992, that was to be compared to the corresponding half a year of 2001. Whereas the global political framework remained the same, there are some specific differences to be kept in mind. In 2001, for instance, Chinese media was forced to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the CCP in such an excessive way that it dominated newspaper coverage even weeks before and after July 1st. By mid-July, however, the media went back to normal. We therefore excluded the first half of July from the sample (of both 1992 and 2001). However, not all differences in the political calendar can be eliminated; the 1992 party congress, for instance, does not correspond to a similar event in 2001. Nevertheless, these two periods which we picked can be regarded the best choice with regards to a commercialized newspaper landscape (changed condition) in a stable political framework (unchanged condition).

Turning to the selection of newspapers, I had to identify four groups of papers, two for each year to base our comparison on. For 2001, the task was easy: Papers are clearly divided into two kinds: Those relying on direct and indirect subsidies (forced public subscription, which guarantees a high circulation and thus advertisement incomes) on the one hand and those relying on market sales and individual subscription. I will refer to the first sort as "commercial papers" in this study, and to the second sort as "party papers". It must be emphasized that these labels have been chosen for the sake of convenience: Of course, commercial papers can be also party papers (*Guangzhou Daily* is an example) in the sense that a party branch is the immediate editor; in a broader sense, all papers in the PRC are still party papers, as their existence depends on the willingness of responsible party authorities to allow their publication, and as the party heavily and directly influences major editorial decisions of commercialized

papers as well. On the other hand, party papers are also commercial in the sense that they try to make money rather than to lose it. The difference which concerns our study is the distinction between papers that have to be sensitive to readership demands and those that do not have to consider the attitudes of their audience. The labels "commercial" and "party" are meant to describe exactly this distinction.

If the study revealed political differences between these two kinds of papers, how could these findings be compared to the situation in 1992, in which these categories cannot be applied? One seemingly easy solution to the problem is not viable: It is not possible simply to take identical newspaper samples for both years, because some papers changed their nature, shifting from party papers to commercial papers, and because the newspaper market in 2001 is marked by the emergence of new outlets that did not exist in 1992. There is a better solution to the problem: In 1992 existed, even to a far smaller degree, papers that did not entirely rely on public funds, but were purchased by individual consumers. We might call these papers "popular" in order to distinguish them from party papers on the one hand and the commercial papers in 2001 on the other. In contrast to the latter, "popular papers" relied far less on their acceptance by the audience, as their main funds were provided by the state, and advertisement income did not play a major role. In contrast to party papers, however, popular papers were softer on ideological issues and were meant as a media combining entertainment and gentle indoctrination. Differences in content between party papers and popular papers therefore provide a good yardstick for our 2001 results: According to the pessimistic view of the Chinese media, differences between commercial and party papers in 2001 should not exceed those between party and popular papers in 1992. According to this view, in both cases the party controls political content decisively and allow only softer versions of the same ideological message. If scholars advocating an increased level of political independence of papers caused by readership demand are right, political differences in 2001 should be far more marked than those traceable for 1992.

Having outlined the idea of the three kinds of papers (party, commercial, popular), I had to select the papers for the samples. Apart from the prerequisites already discussed, the selection should be guided by further considerations:

(3) The sample should cover several regions making sure that results were not unique to one individual province or region marked by specific political or economic conditions.

(4) The papers should be representative in the sense that their readership covers a significant proportion of the Chinese public. Therefore only papers with a circulation of at least 500,000 copies have been included.

(5) To widen the basis of the comparison, a certain diversity among the commercial papers should be reflected, as different papers of this kind have divergent origins and thus show characteristic features (see p. 42ff).

(6) On the other hand, papers have to be sufficiently homogenous to allow meaningful comparison. I therefore should include only general interest newspapers and exclude papers of a more specialized nature.

(7) As I want to track common trends that are not limited to one or two exceptionally liberal papers, I should at least not exclusively select those commercialized papers that are widely known to be extraordinarily daring in their reports. On the other hand, papers should represent a certain spectrum in terms of their readership structure and political trends associated with them.

(8) I calculated (from pre-tests) that it was not possible to analyze more than 16 papers in the time given, since 14 issues of every paper would have to be coded for methodological reasons (see below); I decided to analyze more newspapers for 2001 than for 1992 since the 1992 sample served merely the function of a control group, and the much larger amount of competing papers in 2001 called for more differentiation.

According to these considerations, I selected papers from Beijing and Guangdong, since newspaper competition is lively in both regions and political conditions are rather conservative in the former and liberal in the latter, so that a balanced representation was reached. *People's Daily*, the nationwide central organ of the CCP was chosen because it is a major point of reference for other papers in the country. Beijing Youth News was selected because it can also claim nationwide circulation, appeals to a specific audience (well-educated youth), and underwent the most radical transformation of all papers. The 1992 sample was thus made of *Beijing Daily*, *Guangzhou Daily*, and *People's Daily* to represent the party papers, and *Beijing Evening News*, *Yangcheng Evening News*, and *Beijing Youth News* to represent the popular papers.

The 2001 sample has been enlarged by adding another province and two newly established commercial papers. Liaoning was picked as a third region; it contrasts well with thriving Guangdong as a province rather losing by the reform activities of the last two decades. Commercial papers in Liaoning should therefore reveal a rather critical character, especially as far

as problems related to the economy are concerned. In order to reflect different organizational origins of commercial papers, I picked *Beijing Times* (Jinghua Shibao), a seedling of *People's Daily*; and *Beijing Star* (Xinbao), a paper with extremely loose political affiliation officially published by the Beijing Cultural Department but run by a famous comedy star (Zhou 2002 168). Since *Guangzhou Daily* in the meanwhile had switched its (economic) status, the 2001 sample still consisted of three party papers: *Beijing Daily*, *Liaoning Daily*, and *People's Daily*, and of seven commercial papers: *Guangzhou Daily*, *Beijing Evening News*, *Yangcheng Evening News*, *Beijing Youth News*, *Liaoshen Evening News*, *Beijing Times*, and *Beijing Star*.

Although business papers increasingly display political contents, they have been excluded on the ground that the news they cover are still only party comparable to general interest papers. Including them surely would suggest greater differences (at least in terms of topical distributions) among papers today than in 1992, but might give rise to doubts whether the two sets of papers are truly comparable. For a similar reason, I excluded an extremely critical, but unrepresentative papers like *New Paper* (Xinbao): It would not serve the purpose of the study to select the papers in a way that favors one of the two rivaling hypotheses; surely a few exceptional papers could provide data suggesting great effects, but that would be no proof of a general trend that can be attributed to structural changes. Yet as the sample should include a certain spectrum of papers, I included *Beijing Youth News* also on the ground that it is perceived as comparatively outspoken on political problems (Yu 2000: 37) and rather read by a younger, more educated and well-to-do readership. Evening papers were picked because they are read more by people with low educational background and lower income, by workers and the retired (Yu 2000: 114ff; Luo 1999a).

2.1.2. Sampling the issues

Riffe et al. (1993) and Lacy et al. (2001) could back up a widely used practice of issue sampling by methodological experiments: Comparing results of content analyses performed on an entire set of articles and on gradually reduced samples, they found that two "constructed" weeks are the most efficient representation of a daily's yearly issues. A constructed week consists of seven issues, one for each day of the week, but spread over the year. Following this advise, I constructed two weeks by lot. One bowl contained lots representing the six months, another one 31 lots representing the days. I drew lots according to the following rules:

- (1) Each month (from July to December) should be represented by two (at least) or three (at the most) issues.
- (2) Each day of the week had to be presented by exactly two issues.

(3) The period from July 1st to July 15th was excluded (see above).

(4) The minimum distance between two issues should be six days.

Two examples might elucidate the procedure: if a "third Tuesday" was drawn, the lot was considered invalid and returned into the bowl. The draw, then, had to be repeated. The same happened if, for instance, August 11th had already be drawn, and August 16th was drawn later, as this violated rule number (4).

2.2. Category system

2.2.1 Reliability

As I have pointed out above, creating an appropriate category system is the most crucial task to perform in content analysis. Any chosen category has to be assessed in the light of the study's specific aim. It might be possible to build reliable categories that nevertheless reveal almost nothing about the problem in question: Not everything that can be counted, counts! The reverse is true as well: Unfortunately, not everything, that counts can be counted. Apart from the problem of allusions and hidden opinions previously discussed, other forms of more manifest contents also proved incalculable. I thus had to omit certain categories that were tested in the initial phase of (theory-deviated) category building. What is presented below is the result of a long process, that started with a set of categories I thought to be suitable to measure newspaper content, based on my own newspaper reading and on academic discussions on the subject published by Chinese and Western scholars of the field. This initial category set underwent a repeated process of testing, review, and reformulation that involved the cooperation of a dozen Chinese students of various academic subjects. Following the rather tacit agreement prevailing among the scientific community, an overall inter-coder consistency of 80% was considered to be the absolute bottom-line for reliability, and 90% consistency the value I aimed at. After several pre-tests, I tested the final draft together with the two students that had proved to be most consistent in their coding before. Rather surprisingly, topics turned out to be most difficult to identify; it was only in this regard that we obtained not much more than the bottom-line of 80% (overall consistency was 81.7%), while all the other categories yielded consistencies above the 90%-bench mark (Article direction/national news: 92.2%; Criticism: 93.6%; Actor: 93.9%; Article direction/International News: 94.4%; Countries/Regions 97.8%; Local reference: 99.1%).

2.2.2. The idea of the category system

Research on media content diversity in liberal societies can rather easily measure the political opinion represented by single papers: It is possible to identify viewpoints on certain debated topics, arguments in favor or against a given policy, voices supportive or critical of single politicians or parties, and so forth. Evidently, the media researcher's task is much different in China.

It is clear that no Chinese newspaper is allowed to voice any truly oppositional opinions and may express only very limited criticism of policies and politicians. We therefore had to find other means to measure diverging political content. Fortunately, this search doesn't have to start from nowhere: We know quite well of the sensitive categories in news reporting from the academic discussion inside and outside China (references are given in chapter IV, discussion). They mainly concern (1) certain topics, (2) the amount of criticism (of cadres or of enterprises), and (3) the amount of negative reporting. I will explain the category system we used to measure all these aspects in the next sections. A fourth idea how to assess political opinions expressed by papers concerns international news: Based on the assumption that market-oriented papers will try to cater to their audiences also in the international news section, and that readers in the PRC (as elsewhere) have certain preferences which kind of international news, I developed a category system that aims at measuring the political views of international news sections.

I shall now explain the category system in more detail.

2.2.3. Topics

To start with, it is evident that certain topics are per se more politically-sensitive than others (e.g. corruption). I thus had to identify those topics which can be classified as politically relevant, basing on the extant literature on different policy fields (references are given in chapter IV, discussion). These politically relevant topics include economic news: If there was a diversified newspaper evolving, editors should be sensitive to readership demands stemming from their professional backgrounds and economic interests; we would therefore expect some papers, for instance, being more business-friendly than others, or others to make worker issues and their problems and demands more often subject of their reports.

After a long process of testing the category system, topics had proved to be robust, i.e. inter-coder reliability was high enough to allow a clear identification of these topics. For the sake of a better overview, I grouped these 67 topics into nine comprehensive categories, namely:

(1) Politics: Topics belonging to this category all deal with party politics, propaganda issues, and tightly controlled issues of major national importance (like Beijing's hosting of the Olympics). A high amount of articles pertaining to these categories must be considered as an indicator of a conservative standpoint. It is, however, important to understand that concrete policy issues whose main emphasis is on specific topics, are to be classed according to the categories listed below: an article about one-child policy, for instance, would be coded as "family" (see appendix for definitions).

(2) Law/Justice: Topics include ordinary crime cases (murder, theft, etc.) as well as political or economic corruption and illegal activities of companies (like production processes that consciously violate existing laws). It also contains civil law suits.

Topics belonging to this comprehensive category are politically relevant for various reasons: the importance of corruption cases is obvious; a large amount of crime reports may suggest that the government is not able to secure public safety; and frequent reports on civil law suits might emphasize the growing importance of civil society.

(3) Social Problems: Topics include social welfare, worker issues (working conditions, etc.), reports about wages and salaries, poverty and income disparities, but also conflicts between units or protests voiced by citizens against institutions or enterprises.

While topics pertaining to Law/Justice are more concerned with the relationship of the citizens and the state, this comprehensive category focuses on criticism of enterprises and economic disparities, according to our assumption (see above) that diverging social and economic interests should be mirrored by papers sensitive to their audience's viewpoints.

For the same reason, reports about economic activities are of interest for this study:

(4) Economy: Topics include reports about enterprises, consumers, products, infrastructure, branches, etc. It will be interesting to see, whether papers will try to develop a profile by appealing to reader demands; is it, for instance, possible to detect the emergence of rather pro-business papers over against others that stress consumer protection?

(5) Accidents: Traffic accidents, natural disasters (floods), mining accidents, etc. not only contribute to the amount of negative news, they are partly more directly of political relevance, as especially mining accidents are viewed as directly linked to corruptive practices.

Other topics are not politically sensitive in themselves, but might turn out to be if reports mention problems or voice criticism in a certain direction:

(6) Health/Environment: Topics include environmental protection and pollution, threats to the health of the population, and information or reports on health care.

(7) Science/Education: Topics include reports on all institutions concerned with learning or research, scientific achievements or debates, and cultural institutions (museums, etc.).

(8) Society: Topics include family issues (parental, gender, etc.), ethnic minorities, customs and habits, interaction of citizens

Apart from all these topics that necessarily or potentially contain political views, a large proportion of articles will rarely deal with political issues; they shall therefore be called

(9) Non-political articles: Topics include sports, celebrities, pop culture, performances of foreign or Chinese artists, and prose (like serialized novels; for the political potential of the non-political see discussion, p.118).

2.2.4. Article direction

However, it is clear that such a topic analysis alone would not serve our purpose: Besides their frequency, the attitude expressed in the articles is crucial. It is therefore necessary to grade each article along an "affirmative-critical" scale. Yet, specifics of the Chinese case pose some difficulties here: While research on Western media content can easily identify positions for or against a given policy, a party, or a politician (see for instance King 1995, Dickson 1994), analysis of Chinese media content has to trace more subtle, hidden differences in the reporting about issues, as outspoken criticism of government policies is censored. However, criteria to assess a paper's political stance exist which are debated by Chinese scholars and politicians alike: It is, roughly speaking, the difference of bad news and good news. All Chinese media scholars would agree that the amount of bad news published in a newspaper is a highly political issue (Liu 1990: 161); in 1985, Hu Yaobang once again emphasized the primary role of the press as a mouthpiece of the party, and warned against too much attention paid to social ills or to controversy. He therefore admonished the journalists that no more than 20% of news content should be negative while 80% should be positive (Polumbaum 1990: 41). Yang (2001) describes negative reporting as the most sensitive political factor in news work, and points to the importance of frequency and size as determining factors: according to him, the amount of negative reports should be dosed very carefully, as too much critical reporting could destabilize the political system. A monograph on the issue of bad news (Deng 2001) stresses the dangers of critical reporting; although he concedes the positive function of criticism reports (Deng 2001: 111ff), Deng points out how crucial the question of frequency is in this regard: according to him, the amount of critical reports in relation to the total content of a paper is a measure for its political loyalty: "Some find 70%, some 80%, some 90% of positive reporting correct"

(Deng 2001: 240). The propaganda authorities consequently warn media workers to concentrate on positive news, as they did in a circular in January 2001, when preparations for the 80th anniversary of the founding of the CCP started, postulating that the majority of reports should stress the harmony of the people, achievements and good prospects (RSF 2002).

It is thus clear that it is possible to categorize newspapers according to the percentage of the amount of negative reports. According to Deng (2001: 49ff), they consist of: natural disasters and accidents; conflicts within society; corruption and misbehavior of officials; bad attitudes and habits of citizens; crime. In the eye of the Western observer, this list is a rather motley or even arbitrary compilation covering political (corruption), sensationalist (crime or accidents) or completely nonpolitical (bad habits of citizens) issues. We have to understand that within the Chinese press system, where papers were originally meant to report uninterrupted economic and social successes, bad news of any kind must be rated as not in line with the guidelines. So the basic distinction to be made is clear: affirmative news stresses achievements and harmony, critical news report on negative events and conflict; yet it would probably be insufficient to apply two categories only to describe article directions. Deng (2001) provides a further distinction between critical reports with regard to their degree: "While some are constructive and aim at bettering the situations of the people, others are destructive and aim at polluting the political atmosphere by generating a feeling of decay among the readers" (Deng 2001: 52). The meaning of these words becomes clear when reading Chinese newspapers: There is indeed a certain kind of report that can be described as "critical and constructive", when the existence of a negative phenomenon is only mentioned alongside with the measures taken to solve the problem. Alternatively, positive trends that give hope for a betterment in the near future are discussed. This sort of semi-negative or rather critical report is to be distinguished from purely negative ones (see below). A fourth category that can be applied are "neutral" articles, when a report is merely descriptive of a phenomenon that is neither positive nor negative. In studies on Western media content, the "neutral" category is usually also applied to balanced reports that show the two sides of a controversy. In the Chinese context, however, such reports are of a different quality, as they display conflicting ideas and thus run counter to the official slogan of an unanimous people. Such reports therefore are classed as "critical" in my design, too.

To sum up, the four categories describing article direction can be defined as follows:

(1) Affirmative

A success/achievement or support/harmony is expressed

- improvements on certain economic, social, or political issues are stressed
- improvements are promised, or are described as very likely
- individuals or groups express their support for a policy, a person, a political goal, or an attitude promoted by the party-state
- individuals or groups act in a positive way, helping others, supporting the government, following rules, increasing their knowledge...
- human interest articles with a positive outcome

(2) Neutral

A descriptive article about an issue neither positive nor negative that mentions neither positive nor negative aspects

(3) Rather Critical

A problem or conflict is the main topic of the article, but

- hope for a positive outcome is expressed: The bureaucracy has promised to solve the problem / recent developments indicate an improvement of the situation.
- the reasons for the problem are explained in a way that makes the authorities appear not to be accountable for it, or that shows that solving the problem is not as easy as it may seem.
- negative effects are acknowledged, but can be shown as inevitable.

(4) Critical

The article

- focuses on a problem / a shortcoming / a conflict. Positive aspects as in (3) are not mentioned.
- portrays two or more controversial views on a problem

To gain more ground for comparison, I calculated mean article directions based on the classification on the affirmative-critical scale: Affirmative articles got the value "1", neutral ones "2", etc. Values were added and subdivided through the number of articles belonging to the respective category in question. This process regards the scale as interval, which means that distances between ranks are equal (like they are on a thermometer). One should be aware of the fact that this is so rather by definition: "It is more realistic when trying to scale human d-

mensions to recognize that our scales are approximately of equal intervals - somewhere between an ordinal scale and a true interval scale - and we might to distinguish them as quasi-interval scales" (Emmert 1989: 100). For that reason, the proportion of affirmative, neutral, etc. articles is given additionally in the appendix.

2.2.5. Object of criticism

The distinction of negative and positive news is important to analyze political views expressed by a paper, but the broad range of issues that are considered negative poses another problem: If our analysis stopped here, an article complaining about citizens of breaking traffic rules would (besides the topical classification) not be classed differently from a report about a major corruption case. Yet not only in our eyes, but also to the Chinese reader, these two reports would be of a completely different political importance. Therefore, I introduce a third aspect, namely the object of criticism (if there is any). The most interesting category is, of course, representatives of the party-state, party or government cadres. Criticism reports targeting them are evidently the most sensitive ones (Yang 2001: 53), and are the kinds of reports that have led to bans of newspapers when they became too frequent (RSF 2002). A second target group of criticism are citizens (e.g. individuals violating laws or certain patterns of behavior the government wishes to improve). Such criticism is of course the most conservative one, as these articles feature the state as an educator and master of its subjects.

Distinguishing criticism of officials and of citizens is surely helpful, but there are two more categories that can be of interest to our study: At a level below representatives of the party and the government there are units (and their staff) that serve certain functions in public life, like hospitals, schools, or post offices. Although top positions in these units are often also affected by political decisions, I consider these bodies as less directly linked to questions of the Chinese polity, and shortcomings observed there to be less sensitive in political terms. I therefore introduce a third category, "other units", that contains all units that are neither administrative nor economic. Economic units (enterprises) will be covered by a fourth category: Since it is assumed that papers might try to cater to different audiences distinguished by their economic background, criticism of enterprises should be more frequent in some papers than in others, and can be expected to be connected to other topics.

Initially, I tried to apply more categories, distinguishing for instance, private and state-owned enterprises. However, these distinctions did not work out in practice, as no sufficient inter-coder reliability could be achieved. Anyway, the four categories cover the possible targets of criticism reports very well, as far as political relevancy is concerned.

2.2.6. Actors

Similar to the analysis of criticism, it is also of certain interest to know who is portrayed as the main actor in an article. There is a big difference whether it is a government official, citizens, or enterprises voicing the concern. Even if no criticism is expressed, it is still of interest if, for instance in the economic sphere, the state is portrayed as rather active or passive, or if a report about, say, environmental issues, is based on actions by the government or by citizens. The categories applied to analyze actors are those used to class the targets of criticism: party-state representatives; citizens; enterprises; other units.

2.2.7. Regional reference

Since it has often been observed that criticism reports in Chinese papers are more often concerned with events happening in provinces other than the home province of the respective paper, it might be of interest to analyze whether reports refer to issues or persons of the home province (1), other provinces (2), or if they pertain to the national level or general trends that cannot be located (3).

2.2.8. International News

The five aspects discussed above (topics, article direction, object of criticism, actors, region) are to be applied to articles dealing with domestic news. Yet we know from polls that reader interest in international news is equally strong (Fan 1999: 141). There are, of course, no open policy discussion to be expected in this field either. Yet patterns of diverging opinions and of greater or lesser responses to readership demands might be detected in international news sections, too.

Of course, another set of categories must be applied. As far as certain countries are concerned, the audience might be lively interested in a coverage different from the one favored by the party. Large proportions of the Chinese public seem to hold strong nationalist sentiments against and negative attitudes towards countries which are seen as threatening national interests, mainly Japan and the US. The government, however, tried to make use of these sentiments only when exceptional circumstances called for a demonstration of the collective mood; usually, anti-Japanese or anti-American attitudes are not allowed to be displayed publicly, since the leadership is well aware of the importance of good political and commercial relations with these powers for the paramount national goal of economic development. If those scholars advocating a growing influence of readership attitudes on the political content of newspapers are right, this gap between popular opinions and official viewpoints should be reflected in dif-

ferences between party and commercial papers. Apart from an analysis of reports about these two countries, differences in articles about other regions might also be telling, at least as a ground for comparison. I therefore built a category system which allowed to identify countries and regions that might reveal further differences (for definitions see appendix).

In addition to the US and Japan, Russia is analyzed as a major competitor and/or partner of China, relations with whom have been tense in the past. Western Europe is analyzed as a whole, since differences between European nations can be assumed to be of mere marginal interest to the Chinese public. "Developing Countries" (except for Asia) are analyzed because they might also exhibit different attitudes: Whereas official rhetoric (China as an advocate of Third World interests) will portray African and Latin American countries rather positively, popular interest may rest with sensationalist news from these regions (crime and catastrophes). Similarly, reports on the UN might be more of a more official tune in the party press than in commercial papers, so that we built a separate category for "UN".

Apart from these countries/regions driven by a genuine research interest, other categories have been built to avoid interferences: "Other International Organizations" had to be isolated from reports on the UN; "Asia" is singled out not as an analytical category of interest in itself, but rather to avoid interferences with the category "developing countries" because Chinese relations with neighboring developing countries (like Vietnam or North Korea) might distort the results. Similar considerations are the reason for establishing the categories "Former Soviet Union", "Canada/Australia", "Hong Kong", "Taiwan", and "Israel". It is rather unlikely that these categories will reveal any insight in differences between commercial and party papers; however, if these countries were included in other categories, results would be blurred. I nevertheless refrained from building one large category of "other" countries, since my findings might be of interest to researchers dealing with other questions, and coding articles in this regard did not pose great difficulties.

Apart from governments, reports involving foreign actors such as enterprises or scholars must also be dealt with. Consequently, an article can be coded twice: a report about a Chinese enterprise, for instance, might refer to a foreign investor, or an article about a scientific program might mention a cooperating foreign institute. Such articles are therefore coded as national news *and* as international news. On the other hand, articles about sport or entertainment will quite frequently mention foreign celebrities, but the political quality of such reports is hard to assess. I therefore omitted articles belonging to these categories from the international news analysis (for a discussion of the potential political relevance of such reports, see p.), as I think

it more appropriate to deal with the influence of Western pop culture on the Chinese public in a separate study.

Having classed all articles mentioning foreign governments, institutions, enterprises, or individuals according to the countries involved and the topics the articles pertain to, a third category set measured the attitude expressed towards the respective representatives of the country in question. Having started with a scale of seven different attitudes (strongly positive, positive, rather positive, neutral, etc.), tests revealed that we could not achieve the necessary inter-coder consistency with a scale of more than three levels: "positive", "neutral", or "negative". Generally speaking (for exact definitions see appendix), articles have been classed as "positive" if they portray the country or its representatives as successful, as friendly or cooperative towards other countries or their people, or as a positive model in some respect. Articles describing the opposite have been classed as "negative".

2.2.9. Article size

Since it certainly makes a difference to the impact of an article whether it covers an entire page or whether it belongs to miscellaneous reports consisting of three sentences, the size of articles has also to be measured. However, a reasonable balance between time-consuming precision and research economy has to be found. In this case, it will suffice to distinguish three kinds of sizes: large (articles covering 50% of a page or more), medium (articles covering 10-49% of a page), and small (articles covering less than 10% of a page). Frequencies of articles are multiplied with 3 if they are "large", and with 2 if they are "medium". This system is applied to all articles, regardless which categories are used to analyze them.

3. Summary

A quantitative content analysis was conducted for 16 newspapers. The selection of two time intervals (1992 and 2001, representing the period before and after commercialization of some newspapers set in) and different kinds of papers (regarding the degree of market dependency) enables us to isolate certain effects commercialization has on newspaper content.

A coding team consisting of the author himself and Chinese students developed a reliable coding scheme; the category system was designed in a way that allows to identify political implications of single articles. The hypothesis that market forces have led to an increased political plurality of Chinese newspapers would be falsified, if the gap between commercial papers and party papers in 2001 was not significantly wider than the gap between party papers and popular papers in 1992, mainly in regard to the following aspects: (1) the amount of reporting about politically sensitive topics; (2) the amount of negative reports; (3) the amount of criticism of party-state representatives, enterprises, or other units; (4) the way certain states or world regions that are of interest to the Chinese public are portrayed.