

Beyond Party propaganda:

A case study of China's rising commercialised press

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The rise of China's Commercialised press and the case of *WCCN*

As a result of post-Mao China's market-oriented socio-economic reforms in general and media commercialisation in particular in the past two decades, media structure in China has become increasingly diverse. This has been typically reflected in the sharp rise of the newly commercialised news media sector, which represented one of the most significant changes in post-Mao Chinese journalism (Huang, 2002; Zhao, 1998). Generally, current Chinese news media can be divided into two major categories: traditional Party news media (consist of Party newspapers, main radio and television stations, and the Party's key political periodicals that are directly controlled by, and to be responsible to, the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda departments at various levels), and commercialised news media (normally belong to, and are supervised by, major Party news media, government departments or their sub-units, or semi-official civilian organisations such as women associations, trade unions, scientific research institutions, or enterprises). Instead of imposing a homogeneous and monolithic regulation policy on the country's substantial media industry, post-Mao Chinese authorities, while generally focusing their controls on Party news media, have significantly relaxed their controls over newly commercialised news media (Chan 1993; Chu 1994). For newly commercialised news outlets, they have been generally no longer required to "carry ideological propaganda", and "Censorship standards were to be spelt out in non-ideological and more specific guidelines to [be] implemented by administrative departments, rather than the CCP (Chinese Communist Party)" (Chan 1993: 25.4). Consequently, they enjoy considerably higher autonomy in topic selection and contents than their counterparts in the Party news media sector.

The purpose of this paper is to examine major characteristics of the content of newly commercialised newspapers through a case study of the *West China City News* (*huaxi dushibao*,

WCCN hereafter) as compared with Party newspapers such as the *People's Daily* (*renmin ribao*, mouthpiece of the Central Committee of the ruling Communist Party). Generally, the essential difference between these two categories of press in content is that while the latter largely focus on serving the Party state's propaganda goals, the former, as shown in the analysis of the *WCCN* in this paper, have largely shied themselves away from official propaganda and instead catered for soft news and entertainment. Indeed, even Party news media such as the *People's Daily* have tried hard to expand their contents beyond propaganda. However, their nature as "mouthpieces" of the Party state means they logically remain propaganda-oriented news media, although official propaganda in post-Mao China itself has been largely transformed into serving the country's socio-economic development from orchestrating Mao's class struggle and utopian socialism.

For some reasons, the *WCCN*, which was established in 1995 in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, remains an ideal case to illustrate commercialised Chinese presses' characteristics in their content. First, as the pioneer and the representative of China's new emerged "city newspapers", the *WCCN* is a typical "socialist tabloid"¹. While it is supervised by its parent Party newspaper *Sichuan Daily*, it is highly reader-oriented and enjoys considerably high editorial independence. Second, the newspaper is among most financially successful new commercialised presses in China. By the end of 1998, for example, within fewer than four years since its publication, the young *WCCN* had achieved an average daily circulation of 500,000—mainly through street sales and private subscriptions—and an advertising income of 130 million RMB². Even in the first year of its publication, the newspaper earned profits of more than 600,000 RMB (Ai, 1996). The success of the newspaper in the market has earned it fame from both relevant authorities and the Chinese journalism community (Ai and Lai, 1998). Finally, as relevant previous studies focused largely on new commercialised outlets in the country's more developed eastern coastal region (e.g., Yu, 1994; Zhao, 1998), *WCCN* as a successful inland commercialised press with national reputation remains an ideal example to more comprehensively illustrate how far media commercialisation in China has gone.

In terms of methodology, a qualitative analysis was conducted in this study for the sake of achieving a more contextual-oriented description. One week (seven issues) of the *WCCN* during 13

and 19 November 1998 (during which the principal researcher of this study undertook fieldwork in Chengdu) was included in the analysis. This yielded 124 pages and about 2,000 stories, editorials, articles, pictures, and advertisements. Considering the *WCCN* has remained a reader-oriented commercialised press and characteristics of its contents has changed little since its establishment in 1995, these numbers are quite sufficient for the inference purpose.

WCCN's embrace of popular journalism

In the coverage of the *WCCN*, while straightforward propaganda is extremely rare, soft news, consumer-oriented business news, entertainment, and other reader-oriented information make the newspaper quite informative and attractive. Like most other new commercialised Chinese outlets in the 1990s, instead of providing an elite readership with news stories and articles mainly concerning the Party and government activities and policies, the *WCCN* largely serves urban grassroots readers with timely local news and massive amounts of applied information relating to their daily life. In other words, in newly commercialised media such as the *WCCN*, propaganda has conceptually and practically given way to “newsworthiness” as their guiding principle for news selection. This is significant in the Chinese context because of its historical departure from propaganda-oriented communist media philosophy in general and Chinese communist media tradition in particular.

Soft news as *WCCN's* trump card for “success”

Soft news and other reader/market-oriented news/information in the *WCCN* are overwhelming. This is not surprising at all for a “socialist” popular press. Instead of focusing on news in the Party/state apparatus, the newspaper pays close attention to news in society—streets, families, schools, hospitals, police stations, night clubs, the market, and so on. In its news coverage, narrow/hard political and economic news is rather limited; “Party/state” are no longer legendary terms and are actually rarely mentioned; and even its extremely limited hard news and propaganda-oriented stories are often re-packaged for market sale. Xi Wenju, editor-in-chief of the newspaper, declared that the target readership of his newspaper was “middle and lower-level urban residents” but not the elites. “If your articles and columns are welcomed by the elites while attracting no grassroots...your

newspaper will stay in the printing shop forever," he wrote. "In one word," he said, the purpose of his newspaper was to serve its "God", the local urban grassroots, "heart and soul" (Xi, 1995: 32). By exploiting soft news, particularly sensational soft news, the newspaper achieved an immediate success after its launch in 1995. Since then, soft news has been its trump card for generating circulation and advertising revenue.

Soft news in the newspaper covers a wide range of topics such as sex, violence, sinister gangs, crimes, political and business corruption at the low level, legal stories, accidents, disasters, human interest stories, and so on. For example, during the week from 13 to 19 November 1998, stories relating to these issues in the newspaper were about 262 in total. That meant about 37.4 items each day on average and about 4.6 items in the front page per day.

Investigative crime stories is one of the most popular means through which the newspaper attracted readership. According to one source, the newspaper once spent 400,000 RMB to "organise" a series of investigative reports on missing children³. Another series of investigative stories "directed" by the newspaper looked at how police successfully saved young prostitutes from the hands of criminals. That series alone, it was reported, generated 10,000 copies of additional circulation for the paper during the eight days of the series (Ai, 1996). It was reported that from 1995 to 1996, slightly more than one year, the newspaper published 15 influential investigative report series besides numerous small ones. Some of them were reprinted or transmitted by dozens of news media across the country. Even influential national news media such as the CCTV, the Xinhua News Agency, the Shanghai-based *Wenhui Daily*, and the Beijing-based *Guangming Daily* sometimes took part in the newspaper's investigative reports. The paper thus became quickly well-known nationally (Ai, 1996). As Ai, a leading local journalist and senior adviser of the newspaper wrote:

Investigative reports have virtually never been absent from the newspaper's daily coverage since its publication on New Year's Day 1995. Sometimes the paper even published several investigative reports within one edition. These stories, just like scene after scene of a soap, have attracted urban readers' interest to the utmost. (Ai, 1996: 17)

Sensationalist tendencies in the newspaper's coverage of soft news is obvious. On 16 November 1998, for example, the newspaper published a "robber-police" story plus three photos on the front

page. With the title “Kill Robber and Save Hostage”, the story detailed the total process of a family's life-and-death struggle with two robbers and how policemen finally saved the family's young daughter (who was held hostage) by shooting one robber to death and catching the other one. Similarly, in another story in the same issue, the newspaper, while formally taking a clearly critical stand against a semi-erotic show in a public place from an illegal performing group, described detail of the show. The headline of the story “A ‘Three-Points’ (Bikini) Show in Siyuan” was apparently designed to attract readers' attention as well (16/11/1998: 3). In the same issue, one can still read: people smuggled in China in 1997 were over 6,000 (p. 3); wife was murdered by husband (p. 3); political and business corruptions (p. 7); car accident killed three and injured 26 (p. 7); drunk driver hit down seven persons (p. 7); and so on. Similarly, on the following day, the newspaper used nearly half a page to publish a lengthy story titled “A Seventeen Year Old Girl Wanted to Be a Bride” (17/11/1998: 13). The abstract of the story stated: “She was introduced to a Japanese. The man gave her 910,000 Japanese Yen as trousseau fee. However, while being refused to pay huge ‘introduction fee’, the go-between reported to the court that the quasi-bride was actually below legal marriage age. The Japanese then went to law against his ‘bride’”. Other “hot” stories in the issue included: officials in a local village government ate free in a private restaurant for five years (p. 1); a young and beautiful female manager was murdered in a hotel at Shanghai (p. 16); a drunk man knifed down a conductor (p. 12); exploded light bulb in a bar hurt four young ladies (p. 12); two female car robbers were arrested (p. 12); poisoned food made four persons die (p. 12); members of a juvenile delinquent group were arrested (p. 12); and more. Stories as such in these two issues were far from individual cases. Instead, one would have little difficulty in finding similar stories in the newspaper's daily coverage. Once the newspaper went so far that a local reader even wrote to the paper: “Could you please reduce those stories with such a strong smell of blood and gunpowder about them?” On another occasion, a reader of the paper questioned the ethics and legitimisation of a particularly unpleasant headline: “Lost Deposit while Getting No Pay—She Wants to Skin Him Alive.”⁴

As earlier mentioned, serious news and propagandistic materials in the *WCCN* are extremely limited. When the newspaper had to publish some propaganda-oriented stories to ease pressures

from local authorities for promoting official policies, it normally softened those stories to prevent them from being too boring. Reporting model workers, for example, has been a typical propagandistic means in the Chinese communist press as CCP propagandists believe that “a fine example has boundless power”. Traditionally, model workers were almost always described as perfect communist believers and ascetic moral examples. In the *WCCN*, however, stories about model workers are often re-packaged as popular stories rather than orthodox propaganda. During 16 and 19 November 1998, for instance, the newspaper published four serial reports about a local union cadre named Zen. Instead of applying an orthodox writing style, the report chose some small “legendary” stories about Zen to organise the whole series. The first story, for example, described how Zen as an independent candidate defeated three officially-nominated candidates and was elected as a member of the local People's Congress (local parliament). The second one was more like a detective story. It detailed how a businessman was arrested when he did illegal business with Zen who played the role of a police undercover agent. Others included how Zen struggled against corruption in local government departments, how he helped poor pupils to go to school, and so on. However, that to what extent this kind of repackaged official propaganda can attract and affect readers still remains largely unknown. Even, one may doubt whether or not it can attract readers at all. In short, what we need to know is *who* were exposed to the repackaged official ideology, and among them *who* (if there is any), to *what extent* and *how*, were affected. Such kind of repackaged propaganda is more like a choice of no choice of new commercialised media at this stage as they are keen on a full-fledged commercialisation on the one hand and incapable to completely refuse official propaganda on the other hand. New commercialised outlets would have been more attractive had they been able to spend more energy to explore professional journalistic excellence rather than been forced to painfully repackage official propaganda.

Since the late 1970s, economic construction (other than politics) has become the Party's and the government's new “central task”. Consequently, economic news has increased significantly in Chinese news media's daily coverage. However, in propaganda-oriented Party and government organs, economic news is largely government/production-oriented, focusing on reporting industrial production and economic achievements under the leadership of Party committees and governments

at various levels. In contrast, in new commercialised media such as the *WCCN*, economic news has largely been “softened” into consumer/market-oriented business news and stories regarding major economic events/issues and economic conflicts and corruption. This has made economic news in commercialised media become far more attractive than those propaganda-oriented economic stories in Party and government organs. In the case of the *WCCN*, readers can read a wide range of economic/business news, from macro economic situation analyses to applied market information for housewives. It is noteworthy that consumerism has remained as the essence of the newspaper's economic reports. In November 1998, for example, the newspaper initiated and organised a “Multimedia Real Estate Inspection Tour” campaign, aimed at “serving the consumers” and heating the local real estate market through multimedia mass communications. As the first of its kind nationally, the creative idea of the campaign was that from 14 November 1998, every weekend the *WCCN* and major local real estate agencies would provide free transportation for potential real estate buyers for inspection tours. The campaign achieved great success as it was warmly welcomed by local real estate enterprises and consumers and highly praised by the local government. According to the newspaper, there were more than 500 persons on the inspection tour during the first weekend and they committed more than six million RMB (16/11/1998: 1). Together with another four local news media, the *WCCN* provided a comprehensive report on the campaign. Eye-catching headlines such as “Deal, Deal” (16/11/1998: 1) and “Cash Away (new house/apartment) at Once” (15/11/1998: 1) appeared in the newspaper's front pages. Such bold commercialised campaigns were largely beyond the imagination of traditional Party newspapers such as the *People's Daily* and the *WCCN*'s parent newspaper, the *Sichuan Daily*.

Moreover, coverage of international news in the newspaper, while being strictly framed by the Chinese government's foreign policies and thus giving little scope for comprehensive and independent reports and analyses, has largely focused on dramatic events, conflicts, and war. Consequently, the image of the world in the newspaper is often largely popularised as dramatic series for middle and low-level urban news consumers. On 31 October 1998, for example, Iraq declined its co-operation with the nuclear weapon inspection group from the United Nations in Bagdad. Later the United States warned it would take military action against Iraq. From 13 to 19

November 1998, the *WCCN* published more than 40 reports and pictures on the crisis (about six items each day on average), which made up about 80 percent of the newspaper's total international news items during the week. There were three issues (November 13, 14, and 16) whose international news pages covered nothing but the crisis. From the newspaper's relevant headlines, layout, and content regarding the crisis, one would have little difficulty in recognising its exaggerated and sensational editorial strategy. Apparently, here the conflict was largely used by the newspaper as a rare chance or means to attract readers' attention and promote circulation.

Sports news and entertainment in *WCCN*

In addition to its huge soft news and softened hard news, the *WCCN*'s style of popular journalism is also reflected in its coverage of sports and entertainment.

Along with the boom of the Chinese economy in the past 20 years or so, sports news and entertainment have mushroomed in commercialised presses. While it is true that even Party newspapers now pay more attention to sports news and entertainment than they did before, they have never comprehensively and systematically explored and exploited the huge market potential of sports news and entertainment as new commercialised media do.

In the case of the *WCCN*, its daily coverage of sports news and entertainment shares about one fifth of its total coverage. Regarding its sports news, unlike sports news in most Party and government press organs that are normally wire reports from the Xinhua News Agency, sports news in the *WCCN*, just as in most other new commercialised newspapers, is largely from its own sports correspondents. While sports contests become increasingly nationalised and internationalised and sports reporting becomes increasingly competitive, to send their own sports journalists to remote contest areas has become a very popular phenomenon in the commercialised press sector. Because of this, coverage of sports news in commercialised presses such as the *WCCN* is far more comprehensive and attractive than that in most Party and government press organs. Moreover, while for most Party and government press organs sports news is largely more like dessert after the main course (hard news and propagandistic materials), for commercialised presses such as the *WCCN*, sports news is an integral part of their daily reporting plan, being treated as equally important

as other categories of news. Coverage of sports news in the *WCCN* averages about two pages in its weekday editions and one page in its weekend editions, about twice more than that in most Party and government press organs.

Treatment of entertainment by the commercialised presses and Party and government press organs tells a similar story. For most Party and government organs, entertainment is largely something for consuming on weekends. In contrast, for commercialised newspapers, entertainment is just an integral part of their daily coverage. For them, there is no boundary between weekdays and weekend. Every day has fun and one can enjoy and be entertained any day; entertainment is a part of life other than an ornament of life. In the case of the *WCCN*, its daily coverage of entertainment covers a wide range of topics/issues such as novel series, essays, television and film, arts and music, lifestyle, multimedia and modern life, travel, jokes, crosswords, and so on. From new Chinese bourgeoisie's sentimental twittering to post-Mao China's X-generation's befuddlement, from discussion of the country's increasingly popular underground sex industry to introduction of Taiwan's "Miss nude" (15/11/1998: 11), the newspaper's huge coverage of "entertainment" provides its readers a rather rich and colourful leisure world.

Towards a popularised writing style and layout

As an integral part of its effort to explore popular journalism, the *WCCN* has a highly popularised writing style and layout.

Regarding its writing style, aimed at attracting "middle and low-level" readership, the newspaper has adopted a number of relevant strategies. First, news stories and articles in the newspaper are short and informative. The normal length of its news stories (and most articles) remained about 300-800 words (Chinese characters). Focusing on key elements of news events, stories in the newspaper are short, simple, straightforward, and informative. Second, editors of the newspaper, while showing sound skills in designing news headlines, have frequently used oral and/or local dialect (Sichuanese) to headline their stories. This, as shown in examples below, made the newspaper's headlines vivid (and sometimes somewhat sensational) and eye-catching:

- Ý Strange (*guishi*): Village Party Chief Is not a Formal Party Member (17/11/1998: 3)
 - Ý Deal (*dingliao*): Gen Bao (a leading Chinese soccer coach) Will Remain in Wandan (Club) (17/11/1998: 5)
 - Ý Fan Zhiyi (a star soccer player) Got Big Troubles (*mafan da liao*) 13/11/1998: 5)
 - Ý An Absolute Loss (of Chinese man volleyball team) (*genben da bu ying*) (19/11/1998: 8)
 - Ý CCTV's "Great Operation" (*da shoushu*) (essential reforms in 1998) (13/11/1998: 9)
 - Ý Listen, the Footstep of Digital TV (14/11/1998: 1)
 - Ý Mates, Come to Have a Drink (front-page top story on a local wine festival) (16/11/1998: 1)
 - Ý New Building "Floating on River": 400 Household Sinking Together (bad quality of a new building) (19/11/1998: 1)
 - Ý Chinese Girl and US Man Got "Electric Shock" on "Net" (fallen into love through "Internet-talking") ("*wang*" *shang* "*chudian*") (18/11/1998: 16)
 - Ý Electronic Toy: Boom (*honglong*), Three Children: Ouch (*aiyo*) (children injured by bad-quality toy car)
 - Ý Boom! Bad Quality Building Fell Down (*paxia*) (13/11/1998: 2)
- (Note: Italics were phonetic symbols of Chinese words in original headlines)

A vivid and attractive writing style as such is not only reflected in the newspaper's news headlines, but also in its news writing format in general. Here is an example from the newspaper on an aviation show in Zhuhai, Guangdong province:

Business War: The Main Topic of the Aviation Show

(*West China City News* telegraph, 16 November, Zhuhai): Aiming at contending for (*zhengduo*) the world aviation market's last "fat meat" (*feirou*) (China), the world's top 20 aviation powers such as Boeing and Airbus gathered in Zhuhai to show their strength, as if they would fight for the market to the end (*yi fu juezhan daodi de jiashi*).

Meanwhile, Chinese aviation industries showed no white feather. They, for the first time, displayed their bombing fighter FBC-1, fighter plane 8-IIM which was called "handsome air-man", and their worldwide famous "Long March" transport rocket series. ... (excerpts, italics were phonetic symbols of Chinese words in the original, 17/11/1998: 3)

Moreover, like tabloids across the world, the *WCCN* adopts a colourful and exaggerated style of layout. This has been reflected in its ability and willingness to use photos, exaggerated language style, big size characters and different fonts in headlines, and computer-based layout formats.

Localisation and decentralisation

Another significant difference of the newspaper from traditional Party and government press organs is its obvious tendency to localise and decentralise the content. While the term "localise" here indicates mainly changes in geographical focus of media content, the term "decentralise" indicates

mainly changes in media content on the “centre-edge” (“power-society”) relationship. The tendency of localisation and decentralisation in *WCCN* is mainly reflected in two aspects. First, coverage of local events and issues in the newspaper is not only quantitatively overwhelming, but also prominently occupies the newspaper's main news pages. Second and more importantly, the newspaper has not only conceptually but also practically largely broken with the durable propagandistic tradition in Chinese Party journalism. According to that tradition, all the news media, particularly Party and government organs, were required to support the authoritativeness and policies of the “centres” (the central authorities in Beijing and regional/local authorities across the country) through straightforward propaganda. While a Leninist political party such as the CCP was (and is) very much centralised and vertically structured, this meant all Chinese news media—in the last analysis—must closely follow the propaganda line from the central leadership in Beijing. And to date, such a propagandistic tradition has changed little in Party and government organs, though propaganda is no longer their sole function, and significant changes in propaganda content and skills have occurred as well. In contrast, however, in newly commercialised news media, straightforward propaganda for the central and local authorities is no longer their main task and in many cases has become extremely rare. In other words, neither the “central” (in Beijing) nor the “centres” (regional/local powers) are any longer dominating, nor are they main actors in new commercialised press. Instead, newly commercialised presses have paid far more attention to the “society”.

In the case of the *WCCN*, such a tendency for localisation and decentralisation, while appearing in its whole coverage in general, is typically reflected in its front-page stories. Unlike Party and government press organs whose front pages are largely dominated by propaganda-oriented stories regarding Party/state apparatus at various levels, front-page stories in *WCCN* are newsworthy and highlight events/issues regarding the local society. During the sample week from 13 to 19 November 1998, for example, there were 64 front-page stories in the newspaper. Among them, there were only four national and international news stories. While three of the four appeared in the form of headlines (as abstracts of detailed stories in other pages), the remaining one was a story about a court judgment against a criminal gang. Ironically, according to the report, the somewhat sensational crime story

was provided specifically for “evening newspapers” by the Xinhua News Agency. This, significantly, implied that even the Xinhua, China’s biggest and most powerful official news agency, now realised and attempted to satisfy commercialised newspapers’ different topic selection and editorial tastes from that of traditional Party and government newspapers. Moreover, it is noteworthy that from those 64 stories, one could read virtually no straightforward propaganda for either the central authorities in Beijing or the local authorities in Chengdu. The only propaganda-like piece was a front-page top story covering a response from the mayor of Chengdu to a local news vendor who wrote to the mayor earlier about his concerns on pollution in a major local river crossing the city (17/11/1998: 1). Though adopting an “objective” writing style, the story apparently provided a stage for the mayor (and the local government) to show off—sell his image as a good guy who was concerned about opinions from the grassroots. Moreover, the newspaper’s placement of the item (with little newsworthiness) as a front-page top story could hardly prevent people from perceiving it as a flatterer or “propaganda” for the local authorities. Nevertheless, the item was different from traditional straightforward propaganda stories in terms of content and method. Like many other newly commercialised presses, the *WCCN* apparently tried to play a constructive rather than critical role between the government and the citizens.

It was also noteworthy that during the sampled week (13-19 November 1998), stories in the newspaper regarding Party/state apparatus and political elites at either the “central” or “centres” level were extremely limited. Regarding the “central” level, for example, the most powerful figure in Chinese politics, the Chinese president and the Party Chief Jiang Zemin, was simply mentioned three times in three short stories which were all published in (relatively less important) page four.

Advertisement: The blood of *WCCN*

Like most other newly commercialised news media, *WCCN* is a financially self-sufficient press and therefore its fate essentially relies on its performance in the news market. Since its establishment in 1995, the newspaper has maintained sound financial performance records. And the main indicator is its strong ability to promote circulation and attract advertisements.

Compared to Party and government press organs, advertisements in *WCCN* have three

characteristics. First, quantitatively, advertisements in the newspaper share a far higher percentage of its total coverage than do advertisements in most Party and government organs. For example, while average daily advertisement space in *WCCN* shares about 50 percent of its total coverage in its normally 20-page weekday editions and 12-page weekend editions, this number sharply reduces to about 19 per cent in its parent newspaper, the *Sichuan Daily*. Moreover, while the *WCCN*, like most other commercialised presses, never hesitates to place advertisements in its main news pages including its front pages, advertisements in most Party and government organs' main news pages is much less and many of them (such as the *Sichuan Daily* and the *People's Daily*) virtually never put advertisements in their front pages. Finally, regarding content of advertising, while advertisements in most Party and government organs are largely about industry products, advertisements in *WCCN* cover virtually every aspect of human life. This has been typically reflected in its coverage of service-oriented information.

In *WCCN* (and new commercialised presses in general), service-oriented information is a special form of advertisement. Differing from traditional advertisement, service-oriented information is a brief introduction, description, explanation, or recommendation for a certain product or service, or suggestions on consuming or life style from experts. In other words, they not only tell readers/consumers "what we have for sale", but also provide knowledge about a certain product or service. While they are highly commercial, they provide readers with useful information regarding their daily life. Every day, the *WCCN* provides huge applied information for its readers: from how to choose a car to where one can find a sex therapist. Here is a typical example from the newspaper:

Male Underpants, Female Buyers

"Li Jia Li" (superpower) is a new brand of man's underpants which holds a state invention patent. Differing from traditional man's underpants... "Li Jia Li" has a special separation layer to absorb wet materials in man's private part. And as such it effectively provides consumers a healthy and comfortable "small environment"... While "Li Jia Li" was specifically designed for man, its most buyers were women. They were clever consumers indeed. This is not only because to buy their partners underpants is a reflection of love, but also because to build a healthy and comfortable "small environment" for their partners is actually to provide a protection for women themselves as well. ... (18/11/1998: 20)

Commercial humour like this is largely out of the imagination in Party and government press organs such as the *People's Daily*.

Beat flies and leave tigers: WCCN's "art" of criticising

As a "socialist" tabloid, the *WCCN* knows clearly that under China's current media system, it is not wise at all to challenge the CCP's monopoly of political power. On the other hand, as a financially self-sufficient commercialised press, the newspaper fully recognises that not only is soft news, sports news and entertainment, and a vivid writing style effective means to attract readers and advertisers, but also that critical reports are profitable as well. Sandwiched by political pressure and commercial lure as such, the newspaper has gradually explored a smart strategy of "beat flies and leave tigers" (criticising daily workings of the Party/government and the wrongdoing of low-level officials and preventing from challenging China's authoritarian political system, Chinese leadership in Beijing, and high-ranking officials). As the newspaper's senior adviser Ai frankly admitted, one of the main secrets of the newspaper's "success" was to launch critical reports focusing on "small" social problems with high common interest but not "big" problems relating to high ranking officials and highly sensitive political and policy issues. In its early stage, Ai recalled, the newspaper once tried to beat "tigers" but it later found "it was extremely hard". And therefore, he concluded, the "beat tigers" strategy was confirmed to be actually unwise and unpractical (Ai, 1996).

Arousing no anger from authorities while attracting large readership (so far so good), the newspaper now seems to be quite skilful in its "beat flies" strategy. In an authoritarian and transitional society such as China where corruption is rife,⁵ the newspaper seemed to never have a problem in finding and choosing enough "flies" to beat and earn applause from its readers. During the sample week from 13 to 19 November 1998, for example, "victims" of the newspaper's "beat flies" strategy included three county-level Party and government officials who were arrested because of corruption ((13/11/1998: 11); a corrupt county-level government department (14/11/1998: 3); a state-run factory that illegally drained waste water into a river (15/11/1998: 3); a village chief who drove drunkenly and killed four and injured five (15/11/1998: 6); a local official who interrupted legal work (16/11/

1998: 7); a corrupt village government (17/11/1998: 1); a corrupt village business chief (17/11/1998: 2); a village Party chief who was revealed as not a formal Party member (17/11/1998: 3); a bank officer who used violence against an innocent woman; five members of a soccer club who were cited by police because of illegal gambling (18/11/1998: 8); and so on.

Moreover, the “beat flies and leave tigers” strategy in the newspaper (and in new commercialised news media in general) is also reflected in its huge coverage of criticisms and complaints from its readers against general social problems in the form of “letters from readers”. Those problems include: pollution and other environmental problems, traffic jams, sexual harassment in work places, discrimination (regarding age, gender, race, religion, and so on), degeneration of moral standards, and so on.

However, while “beat flies and leave tigers” itself is a Chinese folk proverb used to satirise current Chinese politics, that how much and how long the newspaper’s “beat flies” strategy can contribute to its circulation seems to be hard to predict, though in journalism history such a strategy appears to generally remain effective among grassroots readership.

Commercialised media as an alternative beyond Party propaganda

Like Party and government organs, new commercialised news media such as *WCCN* provide very few independent reports and critical analyses on the country’s politics and major policies. However, as typically reflected in the case of *WCCN*, differing from Party and government organs, the newly commercialised media sector at least enjoys greater autonomy in criticising concrete political and social problems and wrongdoings such as political and business corruption in middle and low level powers, in providing propaganda-free stories and articles to ordinary Chinese news consumers, and in airing ordinary people’s concerns, proposals, complaints, and gossip. New commercialised outlets such as the *WCCN* won over both the market and the Chinese authorities through a strategy of being critical technically and constructive strategically by providing little social and historical context for its coverage of social problems and leaving little room for anything idealistic.

Safe and commercialised criticisms in the commercial sector is perhaps cheap, nevertheless they do function differently from Party and government organs by contributing to the trend of

decentralisation and depoliticalisation in post-Mao China. While Party and government organs are largely slaves of the Party's propaganda line, commercialised media such as the *WCCN* have committed themselves to informing and entertaining, and consumers and advertisers have largely replaced the Party state as their new "God". While it is true that new commercialised outlets can hardly be regarded as "alternative media" *against* the Party's political-ideological control because of their inability in "posing any fundamental challenge to the dominant (authoritarian) model of political communication (in China)" (Zhao, 1998: 158), they provide readers an important alternative to consume *beyond* narrow official propaganda. They may cause no challenge to China's authoritarian political and media systems instantly; their democratising potential allows of no ignorance. As they move away from promoting straightforward official propaganda, they have significantly increased their coverage of soft news, entertainment, consumerism, and criticisms of concrete social, economic, and political problems. They serve and influence China's grassroots masses. Although changes in the commercial sector "do not generally indicate a revolution from outside the existing media structure but rather than an organised reform from within" (Zhao, 1998: 158), their potential and long-term impact on Chinese journalism's future development may be not necessarily as limited as they look like.

More broadly, it must be pointed out that the significance of the popular commercial sector does not necessarily or solely rely on whether or not or how much they can contribute to China's media democratisation process. World journalism history suggests that commercial media as a distinctive and independent branch of the world's media family has enormous readership across the world and they inform their readers in their own ways (soft news, entertainment, sensationalism, social critique, and so on). It is neither necessary nor possible to require every news medium and every audience to be "serious". And one need not be "serious" all the time as well. Journalistically, the primary merit of popular media actually relies on nothing but their distinctiveness as a certain media category. The "meaning" of commercial media thus does not end up as an ugly opposition to "glorious" serious media. In the Chinese context, the emergence and rapid development of newly commercialised outlets itself is significant and a reflection of change in China's media philosophy and policy.

Another debate in relation to the commercial sector is its “propaganda function”. In her widely-cited study of media commercialisation in China, Zhao (1998), for example, was worried by the claim that “some ideologues have found that talk show hosts in the newly commercialised media outlets are more effective ideological workers than those in the Party’s ideological departments” (p. 8). She also mentioned that “the Party’s ideological workers” had found that new commercialised media “have contributed to a more effective ideological work style” (p. 159) and some chief media managers and articles in Chinese trade journals had also claimed that media commercialisation would not only not undermine, but instead further improve the news media’s propaganda functions (pp. 162-163). She believed that the initial popularity of commercialised media “seems to substantiate these arguments” (p. 163). Zhao particularly mentioned that newly commercialised news outlets had been praised by not only the audiences but also government officials and the Party’s ideologues including Ding Guangen, the CCP ideological chief. She then concluded that “The commercialised media sector has expanded the ideological process to include sociological, personal, and psychological domains” (p. 159). The problem of Zhao’s argument here lies in that, first, her suggestion of “a broader concept of ideology” operated in Chinese news media’s “everyday consciousness and discourses” (p. 5) not only oversimplified the Chinese case through “a nuanced hegemony analysis” (Lee, 2000: 570), but also ignored news audiences’ selective and critical ability in communication process (Klapper, 1960).⁶ Second, it must be pointed out that without research and critical analysis, those claims themselves are meaningless (for example, in what situations/ contexts, for what reasons/ aims, and against what criteria those certain people drew their conclusions). In short, without clear definitions of terms such as “ideology” and “propaganda”, as well as support of substantial empirical evidence, particularly relevant data through reliable audience surveys, new commercialised news media’s capacity in “repackaging the official ideology and selling it with a profit” (Zhao, 1998: 147) is doubtful. In the meantime, very few would deny that the fact that the official ideology has been forced to repackage itself under the pressure of the market itself is significant.

Finally, the difference between (privately-owned and politically independent) Western commercial media and (largely state-owned and Party-controlled) new commercialised outlets in

China is essential and obvious. But this does not necessarily suggest that “unlike Western (commercial) media, which are first and foremost commercial enterprises, these (new commercialised media) in China are first and foremost political organs” that “will cater first to the propaganda needs of the Party” and “profit is not their primary objective” (Zhao, 1998: 161). It might be more accurate and therefore safer to say the Chinese ones are audience-oriented commercialised media with certain propagandistic obligations and profit is critical for their survival as they are basically financially self-sufficient media. In comparison with the Party organ sector, the newly commercialised media sector stands precisely for its moving away from narrow Party propaganda and experiment with popular journalism, its decentralisation and depoliticalisation tendency in content, and its commitment to the needs of the market. As the case of the *WCCN* suggests, in spite of new commercialised news media's incapacity to contradict the Party's propaganda line or completely discard official propaganda, promoting official propaganda aims is neither their main function nor everyday business. Compared with their limited and softened propaganda, their huge coverage of reader-oriented materials (soft news, entertainment, applied information, and so on) is far more significant. It is true that new commercialised news media are largely state owned and controlled. Their certain propagandistic obligations may more or less affect their market performance. They may receive preferential treatment in taxation. But all these do not necessarily mean they have to follow a “politics first and profit second” strategy or they are Party organ-like political outlets. Unlike Party organs that must closely follow official propaganda aims, new commercialised outlets are active and creative performers in the market. Their emergence and development itself suggested Chinese media policy-makers' intention (under growing market pressure) to establish an alternative (reader-oriented) press beyond traditional Party organs. In other words, though the emergence of newly commercialised news media was not a democratic breakthrough but a compromise of the conflict between the Party logic and the market forces, they were, as typically shown in the case of *WCCN*, primarily and principally *not* propaganda-oriented, but new outlets serving the market.

In terms of the consolidation and security of reforms in China's newly commercialised news media sector, we have reasons to be optimistic. Like the country's market-oriented socio-economic reforms as a whole cannot be reversed by the party state, China's media commercialisation has

gone so far that Chinese authorities have to accept it as inevitable. This is not only because the party state cannot afford any fundamental policy rollback, but also because the CCP's political philosophy itself has been transformed into a pragmatic and performance-oriented new approach. The Party state may have executive power to change certain socio-economic and media policies in certain circumstances; but it can do little if any to rollback the historic trend of the society's ongoing capitalist revolution in general and media commercialisation in particular. In the case of the new commercialised press sector, the Party knows clearly that it just cannot afford to kill the goose (the commercial sector) that laid the golden eggs for the country's media industry. While those "golden eggs" precisely largely result from the sector's shying away from narrow official propaganda and pursuit of reader-oriented popular journalism, the Party is therefore historically cornered to where there is little choice but negotiating with the market forces. For this reason, it may be not accurate to say that "Whatever relative editorial freedom they (new commercialised news media) enjoy is permitted by the Party and the government, and it can be taken away at the will of the Party, as the Shanghai-based *World Economic Herald* discovered in 1989" (Zhao, 1998: 159). These comments seem to have not only overstated the Party state's power, but also obscured China's different socio-economic and political contexts in the 1980s and 1990s. While as Zhao herself observed that the rise of the *World Economic Herald* (*shijie jingji daobao*) in the 1980s "was a direct result of its acting as an informal mouthpiece for the Zhao Ziyang faction within the Party" (p. 7), the rise of new commercialised news outlets since the early 1990s is largely a result of post-Tiananmen Chinese leadership's decision to further transform the nation into a full-fledged market economy. While the privileged "freedom" enjoyed by the *World Economic Herald* was easily taken back by the Party by the end of 1988 when no one in the Party's central leadership could protect it any more, to take away the "freedom" enjoyed by new commercialised news media seems neither necessary nor easy for the Party unless it wants to take a risk to substantially change its "reform and opening" policy—that would be a political and economic suicide. More probably, Chinese authorities will continue to balance their media policy by letting the "kite" (media) fly more freely in the sky of the market while keeping the control line in their hands. Like the Party's legitimacy now depends largely on promoting socio-economic development through further reform and opening, the Party's

media policy-makers will have little choice but to make more institutional reforms to accommodate an increasingly expanding market system. As such their “visible hand” might be further impeded by the “invisible hand” of the market.

Notes:

1 Since the mid-1990s, the CCP's major provincial press organs (*shengwei jiguanbao*) have established a large number of highly commercialised and urban reader-oriented daily newspapers. By the end of 1998, within fewer than four years, about 20 such newspapers were launched (“Strengthen Research,” 1999). Because of their very different theoretical approach and practice from China's traditional Party newspapers (either the morning papers of the Party and government or the Party-led municipal evening papers), they are widely regarded as an “individual” press category and have been coined “city newspapers” (*dushi bao*) by the Chinese press community. Though theoretically “city newspapers” belong to subsidiary newspapers of relevant provincial Party press organs, they enjoy relatively high autonomy in topic selection and content. Initiated by the publication of the *Sichuan Daily's West China City News* in 1995, by late 1998, within fewer than four years, about 20, or two-third of, provincial Party press organs had established their own commercialised daily newspapers (“Strengthen Research,” 1999). Their impact on Chinese press industry has been increasingly felt since the mid-1990s. For more about “city newspapers”, see Huang (2001).

2 Personal interview with Ai Feng, former editor-in-chief of the *Press Circles* and senior political correspondent of *Sichuan Daily*; currently editor of the *Press Circles* and senior advisor to the *West China City News*, Chengdu, 17-18 November 1998.

3 Personal interview with Huang Xiaozhong, associate professor in journalism at Sichuan University, Chengdu, November 3, 1998.

4 See *Voices of Readers* (restricted publication), edited and published by the General Editing Office of the *West China City News*, No. 15, October 25, 1998. The headline refers to a malpractice prevalent among employers in China. Because of high unemployment in the countryside, poor farmers were pouring into cities to look for jobs. But they often became victims of unscrupulous business people. They were often required to give a certain sum to their employers as “deposit”. If they failed to come up to their employers' “high standards”, they would be sacked and get no pay. Even worse, they quite often lost their deposit as well. And this often led to violence between employee and employer—as indicated in the story here.

5 According to a 1995 investigative report from the Transparency International, an independent, non-profit coalition against corruption, China ranked as the world's second most corrupt country, following Indonesia. *The Weekend Independent*, Department of Journalism, the University of Queensland, Australia, 25 August 1995, p. 9.

6 According to Klapper's (1960: 19) selective theory, “selective exposure” describes audiences' tendencies to choose certain channels from the wide range available to them or to select certain messages from the

selected channels. "Selective perception" indicates people's tendencies to misperceive and/or twist messages to fit their own preconceptions. They are active, not passive, audiences and they read their own meanings. Similarly, "selective retention" refers to people's tendencies to remember messages selectively, particularly messages that agree with their preconceptions.

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