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**"Hybrid Journalists -- Chinese Journalists in an
era of reform: their values and challenges"**

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“Even when they are scrambling, they have a sense of history and progress. Even while sharing woes, they emanate optimism and fortitude. The nitty-gritty of their jobs might tire them out but doesn't grind them down; where the present seems confusing or dismaying, they take a long view...

They've given us a tour of the terrain in times of transition, bringing to the surface contradictions and quandaries faced by Chinese intellectuals during a period of dizzying change.”

-- Judy Polunbaum “*China Ink: The Changing Face of Chinese Journalism*”

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Chapter 1 Hybrid Journalists

For the rest of the world, the Chinese media have long been associated with a traditional image of propaganda organs acting as a “mouthpiece” for the government and Communist Party. As a result, the image of Chinese journalists is also much less clearly defined than that of their Western counterparts, who are often portrayed (although maybe less often now than before) as firm watchdogs of the public interest and brave fighters in war zones.

“Many Germans think Chinese journalists are like robots: get up, go to the office, do as what they are told to, go home... and get up again,” says Heidrun Haug, founder and CEO of German PR agency Storymaker, who has organized multiple China-Germany media exchange programs in recent years¹.

On the other hand, there have also been plentiful stories in the Western media on “dissident” journalists who have expressed unhappiness about the system and have therefore been marginalized or punished.

In both cases, there seems to be an underlying “journalist versus censor” dichotomy about journalists' professional life in China: a journalist is either an obedient, meek instruction-taker, or a rebellious, outspoken “fighter”.

Judy Polunbaum, long-time Chinese media observer in the U.S. has also noted such black-or-white thinking: “presumptions of a controlled, mechanistic system are all the more entrenched in conceptions of the news media. The skeptical or probing journalist is taken as the exception; the ‘dissident’ who challenges the system is upheld as the brave alternative.”²

Very possibly these two types of journalists may still exist in today's China. But after more than three decades of reform of China's economy and society – and the accompanying commercialization of the Chinese media – the reality is far more complex.

An often-borrowed phrase to describe journalists in Chinese, who have to carry out journalistic duties in the face of a range of restrictions -- both

¹ This is a direct quote of Heidrun Haug said to the author. Direct quotes in this paper of journalists and commentators, unless otherwise stated, were all said to the author during interviews for the paper.

² Judy Polunbaum and Xiong Lei, “China Ink: The Changing Face of Chinese Journalism” (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 1.

familiar and unfamiliar to Western peers -- is “dancing with shackles”, which is probably more true when it comes to the day-to-day life of a typical Chinese journalist.

The aim of this research paper is to go beyond the “mouthpiece-or-dissident” discourse, and venture into the hearts and minds of present-day Chinese journalists: their aspirations, dilemmas, struggles and balancing efforts.

What the research finds is that reform era Chinese journalists are definitely much more than “robots”-- they’re frank, funny, critical with a touch of cynicism, and pretty much like their counterparts in any country. And in terms of values, they’re probably more “hybrid” than their previous generations (maybe their international counterparts as well), as they are caught in the unique double pressure of media control on the one hand and market competition on the other.

As a result, instead of just following some stringent rules, they are constantly in a battle of navigating space, testing parameters, weighing interests and wavering over values in subtle and impressive ways.

They’re what I call a group of “hybrid journalists”.

“The era of choice has arrived”

It might be over-ambitious to try summarizing in such a short section the profound and complicated ways Chinese media have evolved in more than 30 years, after the reform and opening-up in 1978. But if you ask a Chinese born before 1960s to describe his/her personal feelings about such changes, they’ll probably say that there are a lot more interesting newspapers, magazines and TV programs available now –not just *People’s Daily*, Xinhua News Agency and CCTV.

Before 1978, all newspapers, magazines, and TV and radio stations were owned and funded by the government, therefore carrying more or less similar content: some kind of official news releases. Change started in early 1980s, when media organizations had their government subsidies reduced and were forced to enter the market and earn revenue from subscription, circulation and selling advertisements³.

³ Susan Shirk, “Changing Media, Changing China” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

The reasons were many: the inability of the state to continue subsidizing media, the demand from domestic and foreign businesses for advertising opportunities, and the rising need of the public for higher-quality information⁴.

The process was accelerated by the deepening of economic reforms in the mid-1990s, all the way into the 21st century. In 2003, the government eliminated mandatory subscriptions of official newspapers and ended subsidies to all but a few papers in every province⁵.

A most visible result of this “make-your-own-money” policy is the springing up of a wide variety of fresh media on the market, covering not only hard political and economic news, but also “softer”, human-interest domains, which were basically unseen before 1978.

For example, *Sanlian Life Weekly* (*Sanlian Shenghuo Zhoukan* 三联生活周刊), a weekly magazine dating back to *Life Weekly* launched by the famous journalist and publisher Zou Taofen in 1920s, focuses on hot cultural and societal topics and can be roughly seen as a Chinese equivalent of *New Yorker*. *Reading* (*Dushu* 读书), an intellectual monthly discussing literature and history subjects, is more *Granta*-style.

International big names such as *Newsweek*, *Forbes*, *ELLE*, *Timeout* and *Sports Illustrated* have also launched popular local editions in China.

More notably, many party newspapers and magazines, in the face of fierce competition and survival pressure, creatively launched a variety of commercial spin-offs under their umbrella. As a saying goes in Chinese journalists' circles, “Big newspapers uphold political direction; small newspapers take care of the market.”

Spin-offs are usually more financially prosperous and socially recognized than their “inside-the-system” umbrella, for using “lively and colloquial

⁴ Hugo de Burgh, “The Chinese Journalist: Meditating Information in the World’s Most Populous Country” (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 29.

⁵ Susan Shirk, “Changing Media, Changing China” in “Changing Media, Changing China”, edited by Susan Shirk (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

language”⁶ and for carrying more human-interest, in-depth and investigative news stories.

Best examples include the so-called “China's most influential liberal newspaper” *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang Zhoumo* 南方周末), which is a spin-off of *Nanfang Daily* (南方日报), the party newspaper of Guangdong provincial government, and *Global Times* (*Huanqiu Shibao* 环球时报), an often sensationally nationalistic international news daily of *People's Daily*.

It might also be worth mentioning that geographically, Beijing is still the paramount centre of China's journalism and media industry, with the biggest number of media headquarters located there. Shanghai somehow lost its prominence in 1930s as China's publishing capital, and Shanghai-based media are generally (maybe unfairly) seen as “unexciting”, focusing on practical and often “petit bourgeois” topics. Guangzhou, capital city of Guangdong Province and birthplace of *Southern Weekend*, *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (*Nanfang Dushi Bao* 南方都市报) and other cutting-edge publications, has the reputation of being the southern “liberal” home of the Chinese media.

As a whole, “the variety of media offerings in China has mushroomed over the last decade, a fact patently obvious to anyone browsing newsstands, where a deluge of magazines, dailies and tabloids beckons to passersby”, says Qian Gang, a former *Southern Weekend* managing director, and now a media studies scholar at Hong Kong University⁷.

In a book written with David Bandurski, they summarize the three-decade change as: “The era of choice has arrived.”

“What's wrong with Chinese journalists?”

The arrival of commercialization and the era of choice sounds exciting, not only for readers, but also for journalists, who have much more professional opportunities than ever before. However, this new era has also posed new and unique challenges for them.

⁶ Susan Shirk, “Changing Media, Changing China” in “Changing Media, Changing China”, edited by Susan Shirk (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

⁷ Qian Gang and David Bandurski, “China’s Emerging Public Sphere: The Impact of Media Commercialization, Professionalism, and the Internet in an Era of Transition” in “Changing Media, Changing China”, edited by Susan Shirk (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 44.

First of all, a market economy with media control means journalists and editors now have two masters rather than one.

For most party newspapers and magazines – “inside-the-system media” as they are called in China, as they are still regulated and managed in the pre-reform way - market pressure is less significant.

However, commercial publications -- both commercial spin-offs and independent media -- are faced with the double pressure of being both politically correct and producing exclusive and attractive stories to ensure commercial success in the highly competitive market.

“The media now has two masters, the party and the public”, note Qian and Bandurski, so editors and journalists of commercial publications have to make an often painful balance between the two⁸.

Secondly, as China’s economy grows, living costs in big cities also soar, and middle-incomers like Chinese journalists find it more and more difficult to have a decent life based on their salary. On *Weibo* (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter) journalists often call themselves “journalistic migrant workers”. Many of them often turn to “red envelopes” – cash paid to journalists for favourable reporting – for additional sources of income, and some even go so far as to ask for bribe.

Hu Shuli, now Editor-in-Chief of *Caixing* (财新) and former Editor-in-Chief of *Caijing* (财经) (both among the best recognized business magazines in China) expresses her worries like this⁹:

“Besides conventional reporter bribery ---- payments for travel and news coverage, or even cash packages and press conference ---- unprofessional behaviour has been rising in the business media. The most egregious are incidents of reporters who blackmail company officials by threatening to publish negative stories.”

Thirdly, it's generally agreed that present-day Chinese journalists are becoming more “professional” than previous generations, as they “have taken

⁸ Qian Gang and David Bandurski, “China’s Emerging Public Sphere: The Impact of Media Commercialization, Professionalism, and the Internet in an Era of Transition” in “Changing Media, Changing China”, edited by Susan Shirk (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 43.

⁹ Hu Shuli, “The Rise of the Business Media in China” in “Changing Media, Changing China”, edited by Susan Shirk (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 87.

on board the concept of ‘audience’ to complement and replace that of ‘the people’ or ‘the masses’”¹⁰, and largely embrace liberal journalistic values such as journalists should be watchdog of public interests¹¹. Despite this, journalists' prestige as a whole has become increasingly controversial, and may be declining.

Shixin Zhang, a Chinese media researcher from University of Leeds, did a survey with 18 Beijing journalists in 2006 and found “many respondents agreed that respect for journalists in society is declining”.

“They attributed such decline to three developments: commercialization and market competition resulting in the publication of too many newspapers and too many journalists, some of whom are unethical and immoral; the trivialization and sensationalism of news; and technology, which allows educated people to access diverse news sources¹².”

“The issue of journalistic ethics is a thorny one in modern China. The question is simple: what’s wrong with Chinese journalists?” she wrote.

Breaking Down “Hybridity”

With all the changes and challenges, it is difficult to paint a clear picture of present-day Chinese journalists.

Jonathan Hassid, research fellow at China Research Center at the University of Technology, Sydney argued in his paper “4 Models of Chinese Journalists”, that besides the more “clichéd” images of “mouthpiece” and “American-style professionals”, there are two other more common types of Chinese journalists-- “advocate professionals” (those who aspire to influence public opinion and policy making) and “workaday journalists” (those who are mainly concerned about steady pay and employment)¹³.

No doubt the proposed two new models are more reflective of the changes in Chinese media and journalists. However, in a typical Chinese journalist's

¹⁰ Hugo de Burgh, “The Chinese Journalist: Meditating Information in the World's Most Populous Country” (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 33.

¹¹ Fen Lin (2010). A Survey Report on Chinese Journalists in China. *The China Quarterly*, 202, pp 421-434

¹² Zhang, Shixin, Ivy (2009). What’s Wrong with Chinese Journalist: Addressing Journalistic Ethics in China Through a Case Study of the Beijing Youth Daily. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol24(2), pp173-188

¹³ Hassid, Jonathan (2011). Four Models of the Fourth Estate: A Typology of Contemporary Chinese Journalists. *The China Quarterly*, Vol 208. pp.813-832

mind, he/she may not distinguish very clearly which category they belong to. More likely and realistically, they have a bit of all these concerns in day-to-day work and it's always a matter of prioritizing between them.

Therefore, “hybrid” is probably the more accurate word to describe Chinese journalists’ unique value system. There is evidence for this “hybrid” nature of Chinese journalists in another survey on contemporary Chinese journalists by Fen Lin in 2010, which showed “Chinese literati values coexist with both the modern professional and Party journalism values during the current journalistic professionalization”, and “such coexistence results in complexity in journalists’ attitudes and behaviour”¹⁴.

In the following chapters, I'll try to break down this “hybridity” in three ways:

1) Their professional values: in the face of both media control and rampant commercialization, it is difficult to remain objective, neutral, and a defendant of public interests. How do they balance these concerns?

2) Their patriotic values: in pre-reform days, Chinese people were taught that loving your country means loving your government. But there are signs indicating things may be changing for a new generation of journalists, who take globalized information sources as a reference point for their judgments. I will seek to assess whether this is true and to what extent they have invented their own version of patriotism.

3) New technology: are increasingly popular social media like Weibo changing the way of reporting news, sharing information, expressing viewpoints and more important, reshaping their journalistic values as well as the future development of Chinese media?

The research will be based on in-depth interviews with ten Chinese journalists across platforms, with nine from print media (newspaper, magazine and news agency) and one from broadcasting. At the request of interviewees, the names shown in the paper are mostly just the initial letters of their surnames (For details see Appendix 1: Interviewees List and Appendix 2: Interview Questions).

It’s also worth mentioning that most of the journalists interviewed were born in the 1970s and 1980s. They have come of age after the Cultural Revolution,

¹⁴ Fen Lin (2010). A Survey Report on Chinese Journalists in China. *The China Quarterly*, 202, pp 421-434

and have grown up with reform and opening-up, so they are different from previous generations who spent part or most of their lives in the Maoist era.

In China the 'post-70s' and 'post-80s' generations, as they are known, are widely seen as more liberal thinking, rule breaking, and sharing more similarities with their western peers. Now aged roughly between 25 and 40, they will be (and some already are) the decision-makers in the Chinese media in the near future.

How this new generation of Chinese journalists dances with the old shackles will therefore be of great significance in the coming years.

Although such a small sample (as limited by time) is by no means sufficient statistically and may only offer a snapshot into this younger generation of Chinese journalists, I hope by talking in-depth with them about their values and challenges, we will get a better understanding of Chinese media when it is at a critical stage of development, as well as Chinese society as a whole.

Chapter 2 Professionalism with Chinese Characteristics

To make sense of Chinese journalists who seem capable of both working under media control and aspiring to be professional journalists, the first task is to try to decode their professional values.

Over a time span of one month and a half, I talked to ten Chinese journalists and editors about their values and challenges, each for about 2-3 hours, and the question “Can you describe your professional values” was usually the one they pondered over for the longest and found most difficult to answer.

There is consensus though: their professional values are very “mixed”, or hybrid. As shown in the interviews, “western” (or liberal) values of press freedom and independence, “party journalism” values (that journalism should serve the interest of the party), Chinese traditional literati values (that an intellectual should contribute to the improvement of the country), as well as commercial values (news should appeal to the audience and sell in the market), all play a role in their minds.

Sam Geall, Executive Editor of *China Dialogue*, a bilingual online journal focusing on China's environment issues, who have worked with many Chinese environment journalists and editors also notes such a unique “hybrid” professional value system:

“It's quite amazing to see into Chinese journalists' minds, as American press values co-exist with party values. And they're actually taught this way in journalism schools -- they go to one class of western journalism in the morning and a party journalism class in the afternoon.”

Starkly Different Values in One Mind

The ones who feel most “mixed”/hybrid seem to be those from Party spin-off media, whose journalists and editors more often have to negotiate a balance between party political needs and commercial interests.

Mr. W, an editor of 15 years' working experience with *Economy Monthly* (*Jinji*, 经济), a spin-off of Beijing-based party newspaper *Economic Daily* (*Jinji Ribao*, 经济日报), said his values are “mixed as a whole, with

a little bit of everything”, but the two most important parts are “press freedom and independence” and “party journalism values”.

“I do believe in press freedom and independence, but in different countries with different political systems it has to be implemented in different ways -- but how (to implement it in China), I am not sure...”

And on the whole, younger journalists (those born after the 1980s) seem to have more liberal values than those born in the 1960s and 1970s.

Ms. Y is a journalist in her late 20s with 5 years' working experience with *Oriental Morning Post* (*Dongfang Zaobao*, 东方早报), a Shanghai-based daily targeting urban residents in the Yangtze-River Delta with a subscription of 400,000 copies, and a spin-off of Shanghai's biggest party newspaper group *Wenhui-Xinmin* (文汇新民报业集团).

When asked to describe her professional values, she explained by breaking it down into percentages: “Western values a little bit more than 50%, and the others (party values, Chinese literati values and commercial values) a little less than 50%.”

“How does that function in your day-to-day work?” I asked.

“When you're working, you usually don't have enough time to think carefully about values. Most of the time my editors and myself just make it simple: sticking to our own values -- press independence and freedom -- as far as we can, and for what we can't control, we'll have to let it go”, she said.

However, although her core professional values are “Western”, she also mentioned an evolving understanding of “party journalism” after starting to work: “When I was a journalism school student, I very much admired the western values of press freedom and independence. But now I feel that some ‘party journalism’ values also holds true, such as the control of the time to release news – for example, in cases of breaking news or natural disasters, sometimes we should not publish information right away, but instead select a ‘right’ time, in order to channel social sentiment.”

Ms. X, another “post-80s” editor from Xinhua News Agency, also said her core values are liberal, but she has to find a balance between “liberal” and “practical” in real work:

“My most basic journalistic value is press freedom and independence, and ensuring the public's full right to know. I also hold certain commercial values, that journalism not only should shoulder social responsibility, but also needs to have market values, otherwise journalists and editors won't be paid decently or be able to say no to paid journalism. As for ‘party journalism’ values, it has to be an important concern in today's China no matter if you agree with it or not.”

On the other hand, Ms. J, a journalist from the Hong Kong-based independent English newspaper *South China Morning Post* said she “doesn't have much party values or Chinese traditional values”, and what's most important for her is “journalism should be a watchdog of public interest and a newspaper has to strive for commercial success”.

Yoshikazu Kato, a Japan-born China commentator and columnist who has written for various well-known Chinese language media such as *Global Times*, *Southern Weekend*, *FT Chinese* and *New York Times Chinese*, said his general impression is most Chinese journalists and editors don't have one clear journalistic value:

“I haven't seen many journalists with clear journalistic values after graduating from university. What actually happens is so-called ‘bottom decides brain’ (a Chinese slang meaning ‘where you sit decides what you think’)-- those getting into party media tend to have more party values, and commercial media journalists have more market awareness. Those working as research assistants in western media are usually more ‘westernized’.”

Kato interprets this “mixed” or hybrid value system as “a strong and somehow forced pragmatism”.

Sam Geall, on the other hand, thinks the co-existence of sometimes starkly different values in one mind is “very reflective of the transitional Chinese society where many value systems live together”.

“That's probably why journalists and editors in China often feel lost”, he said.

“Red Envelope”: Not Right But Acceptable

Another often discussed and criticized “characteristic” of Chinese journalists is “red envelope journalism” -- accepting cash handed by relevant interest parties in exchange for favorable coverage.

An interesting question is: do younger generation Chinese journalists still take “red envelopes”? And if so, how do they balance it with their professionalism ethics?

First of all, it's probably worth mentioning that “red envelope” doesn't have a “universal size” -- it can be both small and large. A “small” envelope usually refers to “taxi money” given by PR agents in press conferences ranging from 200 to 1000 RMB (£20 to £100). And a “large” envelope is more of a “bribe”, or “hush money” -- for instance when a mining accident happens, a mine owner or local government officials might want to pay journalists money to hush them up.

Among the 10 journalists I talked to, all -- without exception -- confessed they have taken “taxi money”. They described it as an “industry rule” and therefore “acceptable”, although most think it's “not right”.

The passive (sometimes active) acceptance of the “red envelope” has to do with the unsatisfactory salary Chinese journalists get from work, as the “red envelope” can be an easy and good additional income resource.

Ms. Y of *Oriental Morning Post* described how she gradually built up the expectations for “taxi money” and jostled with her professional values:

“When I just started work, my basic monthly salary was only 3000 RMB (£300), and taxi money I got each month could add up to 1500 RMB (£150), which was quite an income. Sometimes my senior editors, in order to ‘boost my morale’, purposefully dispatched me to attend more press conferences so that I could ‘earn more money’. As a result, at the end of each month I started to calculate in my mind how much ‘taxi money’ I could get for the next month -- yes, unconsciously, I have taken the ‘red envelope’ as part of my rightful income although it's not right ethically...”

Ms. S, from *Oriental Outlook* (*Liaowang Dongfang Zhoukan*, 瞭望东方周刊), a Shanghai-based news weekly and spin-off of Xinhua News Agency with a subscription of 200,000 copies, “justified” “taxi money” this way:

“I think an appropriate amount of taxi money is reasonable, because journalists are not well paid in China. Low pay, plus inadequate welfare and insurance, are making their lives unsustainable. If taxi money can be a supplement, I see nothing wrong with it.”

Ms. X with 9 years' working experience with Xinhua News Agency, on the other hand, sees an “interest chain” behind “taxi money”: “journalists get additional income, interested parties get favorable reports, and media organizations can sustain ‘*guanxi*’ (a relationship) with corporations and government organizations...”

However, almost all the interviewed journalists said that although they accept taxi money, they would never ask for or take a “big envelope” -- the bribe or hush money.

Only one confessed she once had to take a 20,000 RMB (£2,000) “red envelope” from a company affiliated to a local government during an investigative interview – “otherwise they wouldn't ‘trust’ me and I could never finish my interviews.” But she said she reported this “red envelope” to her superior editors and gave it back after the story got published.

“But many journalists, especially those from local (provincial or municipal) media, not only took big envelopes -- some even negotiated for bribes (by threatening to publish negative reports). That's why journalists' reputation is going down and many people dislike us”, another interviewee Sun Chun-long said.

Is “taxi money” also jeopardizing journalistic judgment? Most said no -- unless the envelope's big enough. “In most cases ‘taxi money’ is just a few hundred *yuan*, therefore it won't have a substantial effect. But if it reaches 4-digits, you probably have to write reports as you are told to”, Ms.Z with 6 years' working experience with *Oriental Morning Post* said.

“I'm so not middle-class”

Yoshikazu Kato, who has an insider's knowledge of both Chinese and Japanese journalists, tends to think the “red envelope” is ultimately a result of “system failure” of the whole media system, which fails to pay journalists adequately so that they don't have to resort to other means of “grey income”.

He illustrated his point by comparing the income between Chinese and Japanese journalists in his column article “Why Chinese Journalists Take the Red Envelope” (*FT Chinese*, Dec.2, 2009):

“An average Chinese journalist's monthly income is around 3,500 RMB (£350), which adds up to around 40,000 RMB (£4,000) annually. Those from top media can earn up to 100,000 RMB (£10,000). And based on my 6-year living experience and close interactions with the Chinese media, journalists are among the most stressed group of people in terms of work and income. In Japan, the average starting salary for a beginner journalist is around 300,000 to 400,000 RMB (£30,000 to 40,000) a year, and after working for 10 years their annual income can rise to 800,000 to one million RMB (£80,000 to 100,000), therefore they wouldn't want to risk their jobs by taking some little ‘red envelopes’.”

Interviews with Chinese journalists and editors also show that although their income has increased over time, especially for those from commercially successful media, most of them (7 out of 10) still don't have a sense of being “middle-class”.

“I'm so not middle-class!” Ms.Y of *Oriental Morning Post* proclaimed. “Compared with my university classmates who work for multinational companies, I'm lagging way behind in salary terms. I had to borrow money from every possible source when I bought my flat, and work really hard to the extent of not going home during Chinese New Year to be able to pay the monthly mortgage”, she said.

She described her income level as “middle to lower middle” in the increasingly expensive big cities such as Shanghai.

Ms.G, a Beijing-based Xinhua journalist, said: “if middle-class means owning a flat and a car in Beijing, then I am -- but I won't be able to afford these only from my salary. It was after I got married and with the help of both families that we could finally buy a flat and a car.”

Even Ms.Z, a broadcasting journalist from Dragon TV, Shanghai's major broadcaster and considered one of the best-paying media organizations in Shanghai, said her pay was “just average” – “except for the company top leadership and well-known anchormen and anchorwomen, journalists like us are still struggling to pay the monthly mortgage and the children's school fees.”

Ms.S of *Oriental Outlook* also pointed out that besides income, Chinese journalists don't seem to have the sense of financial stability that is usually associated with being “middle class”.

“Journalists in China don't have secure welfare and pension systems to rely on as government employees, and many frontline investigative journalists don't even have proper insurance -- how can you expect them to feel 'middle class' with such poor conditions?” she said.

Four years after the “red envelope” article was written, Yoshikazu Kato still thinks “the problem is quite severe”.

“I do understand and actually have sympathy for the journalists who take the ‘red envelope’”, he said, “and the bigger issue is -- how to help them overcome the always looming sense of insecurity?”

Chapter 3 Do They Love China...And If So, How?

It's indeed a very Chinese characteristic to discuss patriotism as an important journalistic concern. Except for highly political or geopolitical topics, a British or American journalist probably won't think much about whether their report is “good” for the country or not.

However, Chinese journalists do have such concerns. This probably has to do with the fact that journalism in China has always been heavily loaded with high social expectations after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. In China journalists are often referred to as “Kings without Crowns”, to underpin their exceptional professional importance to correct social wrongs, uphold justice and ultimately make the country a better place.

It may also have to do with the Chinese traditional literati teaching that an intellectual should not only do well professionally, but also contribute themselves to the improvement of the country and the world. As a famous saying in “*The Great Learning*” of the Chinese traditional classics *The Four Books* goes, a gentleman should “cultivate himself, harmonize his home, run the country and bring peace to the world” (*xiu shen, qi jia, zhi guo, ping tian xia*, 修身、齐家、治国、平天下).

However, for a globalized generation of journalists who grew up eating MacDonald's, watching Hollywood blockbusters and believe (with varying degrees) in press freedom and independence, does traditional and pre-reform patriotism values still ring true?

The answer seems to be both yes and no -- yes, they do love China, but patriotism becomes a “tricky” topic, as they seem to distinguish clearly between love for country and love for government.

“It's a Journalist's Responsibility to Defend National Interests”

When being asked “do you love China?”, Ms.S of *Oriental Outlook* answered by telling a story about Dunhuang¹⁵.

¹⁵ A city in northwestern Gansu province of Western China, a major stop on the ancient Silk Road, best known for *Mogao Caves*, A UNESCO World Heritage Site filled with exquisite Buddhist art and manuscripts from the 4th

“I always thought I don't like this country -- until I became a journalist and went to Dunhuang on a press trip. When I stared at the Mogao Caves statues, my eyes became wet and I felt like crying -- I was born in a country with such a beautiful culture...”

Several others also mentioned "wet eyes" when seeing the national flag raised during the Olympic Games.

Their journalistic patriotism may be best proven by the fact that half the interviewed journalists -- most from state media or their spin-offs -- think it's their responsibility to defend national interests.

Ms.G, a Xinhua overseas correspondent, recalled how outraged she was when seeing a group of activists upholding banners of "Tibet Independence" in a public square in Europe. "I immediately went back to office and wrote a commentary arguing that people should go to Tibet and take a look themselves. Tibetan people's lives are improving day by day, and it's unfair to say they are ill-treated by the Chinese government."

Mr.W, of *Economy Monthly* said: “It's a journalist's responsibility to defend national interests, no matter whether it's in an ‘aggressive’ or ‘calm’ way.”

However, although defensive of national interests, most of interviewed journalists and editors said they don't like the “angry” approach of *Global Times*, an often sensational and highly controversial international news daily usually taking over-nationalistic stands on international issues concerning China.

“Patriotism should be resolute in attitude but softer in words, no need to be full of anger like they are”, Mr.W said.

Sam Geall, who talked in-depth to 15 Chinese environment-reporting journalists (most from state media) participating in a climate change fellowship course organized by *Caixin* media and International Media Support (IMS) in 2011, also found “most of them have 'national interest' concerns in the international politics of climate change.”

“Some journalists feel they have a ‘dual role’: on the one hand, they have to speak for the interests of party and the country; on the other hand, they should aspire to something high as professional journalists,” Geall said.

It is also worth noting that Chinese traditional literati values from thousands of years ago are still highly valued by post-‘80s generation journalists: among 10 interviewees, two said they had “a little” traditional literati values in mind and the other eight all said they are “very important”.

Another example of Chinese journalists' unique concern of patriotism may be their attitudes towards so-called “internal reporting” (*neican*, 内参) -- journalists sending reports, usually “negative” ones on burning social issues, through “internal” channels to high-ranking government and Party officials instead of releasing them to the general public. It is a legacy both from pre-reform era days and Chinese literati tradition of *jinjian* (进谏) -- good literati offer suggestions to the emperor in the best interests of the nation.

Interestingly, all the interviewed journalists and editors in this paper, mostly born after 1980, no matter whether they have ever written internal reports or not, unanimously endorse such a “journalism form”, as “it does help to solve issues of public concern and ease social tensions given the current media environment”.

Love with Mixed Feelings

However, although younger generation Chinese journalists do love their country, most of them say they love it with mixed feelings.

With increasing distrust towards the government on issues such as corruption and pollution in China in the last few years, Yoshikazu Kato also noted a growing cynicism among Chinese journalists – “they find it more and more difficult to say ‘love’, whether it's love for the country, or the government, or society.”

One good example may be on Chinese social media *Weibo*, where there are all kinds of sarcastic alternative wording for patriotism-related words such as “China” and “Beijing”. For instance, many journalists

use "our heavenly empire" (*tian chao*, 天朝) when it comes to "China" or "homeland", and Beijing is often referred to as "empire's capital" (*di du*, 帝都). When these terms are used, journalists are often expressing their frustration and sarcasm over government behaviour on certain issues.

One reason that leads to such a mixed feeling might be a clear distinction between love for the country and love for the government in younger generation Chinese journalists' minds, which were presumed to be the same in pre-reform days.

Among the 10 journalists interviewed, except for two who did not respond, eight said the two loves were not the same. "Loving the country doesn't mean loving the government, just like loving your hometown doesn't mean loving local government -- I'm very clear about this," Ms. Y of *Oriental Morning Post* said.

Xinhua journalist Ms. G put it into a more positive way: "Loving the country is not the same as loving the government, but the two cannot be separated in reality, as the government is like the 'butler' of your home and the only way to make your home better is to make the government perform better."

And such mixed feelings could also translate into professional dilemmas at work. As Ms. Y said, "it's often not easy to find a clear stand between love for the country and suspicion towards the government."

The dilemma was most keenly felt in her report of the Shanghai fire accident on Nov 15, 2010, when a 28-storey residential building in Jin'an District caught fire and killed 58 and injured 71 residents. Its direct cause was the carelessness of two uncertified electric welders working on the scaffolding outside the building, but there had been suspicion from the beginning that the two welders were hired as cheap labor by the builder who got the contract because of a "close relationship" with district government officials, which was later confirmed by an official investigation.

Ms. Y witnessed first-hand the bursting anger of victims' families towards corrupt officials, but on the other hand, she also thought as a journalist she should instill "positive energy" into the society instead of

further reinforcing distrust towards government after such a tragic accident. “I was basically trapped in the two very contrasting concerns and had no idea what to do”, she said.

In the end, she found a middle-way – “not to add trouble for the government” by publishing mostly “moving stories such as how some victims tried to help others at life-and-death moments”, and reporting “negative” stories such as public rage towards corruption through “internal reporting”.

“I know this is a very Chinese way of reporting and probably doesn't go with liberal journalistic values that media should be a watchdog and remain critical, but we also should take into account that social stability is of utmost importance for China”, she said.

“A Broader Notion of Patriotism”

With all the dilemmas and balancing efforts, which often end up as frustrations, many interviewed journalists mentioned an increasing sense of “powerlessness”.

Sun Chun-long, an investigative journalist for 12 years first with *Xi'an Evening News* (a local daily newspaper in Xi'an, Shanxi Province) and later *Oriental Outlook*, made his name known across China in September 2008, by writing an open letter to the Governor of Shanxi Province in his blog. In the letter, he disclosed that a mining accident in Loufan, Shan'xi Province in August in which local officials claimed only 11 workers died, actually killed at least 41.

This letter, together with a victim list he investigated by himself despite death threats from local officials, was openly praised by Premier Wen Jiabao, who then ordered a thorough re-investigation into the accident which proved Sun was right. As a result, Sun was named “Guardian of Law of the Year” in 2008 and short-listed for “Person of the Year Who Moved China”.

However, when looking back into that period of time five years later, Sun said it was “both the peak of my professional career and the most powerless moment”.

“I always thought I could make society better by being a good journalist, even if it means risking my life. But I found I was too naive -- after my report local officials still had no intention of promoting

good governance, but just invented new ways of avoiding journalists. And the general public, after reading too many such reports, feel more disillusioned and negative about life as a whole.”

Therefore, one year after his peak professional moment he decided to quit the newly-promoted position of assistant editor-in-chief and set up an NGO called “Veterans Go Home”, which raises funds to help a group of forgotten World War Two Nationalist veterans left behind in Myanmar (whom he discovered in a reporting trip) revisit their hometowns in China.

“They fought for their country during the war, although in the army of another government, and they deserve to be remembered -- at the end of the day, patriotism is about government loving each individual therefore being loved back. The reason I decided to start such an NGO, is to change the people's way of thinking in a heart-warming and soft way, instead of the more confrontational watch-dog way I did before,” he said.

He also admitted this may be an even more challenging task than reporting mining accidents. “Some people say I am pouring a bottle of purified water into the polluted Yangtze River, and the effort is too insignificant. But I'll keep doing it, and I believe the longer I carry on, the more people will do the same thing. I deeply love China and this is my form of patriotism”, he said.

Besides Sun, Ms. J of *South China Morning Post* also noticed “many colleagues have left journalism and joined some form of social advocacy by using their social connections and influence”, as “helping others yield a better sense of achievement than being a journalist, which is powerless.”

This may be one of the many ways younger generation Chinese journalists reinvented what it is to love their country, which is both different from the traditional literati way whose only hope of bettering the country was to enlighten the Emperor, and their pre-reform predecessors whose career choices were usually limited to becoming propaganda officials or teaching journalism.

And as Sam Geall has rightly observed: “I can see most Chinese journalists do care about their country, and they are developing a broader

notion of patriotism, much wider than simply trusting the government, although there are still certain levels of cynicism and distrust."

Chapter 4 Weibo and WeChat – All Change?

Weibo, literally meaning “microblog”, is the rough Chinese equivalent of Twitter. After its launch in 2009 by China's biggest media platform SINA, it has quickly become “the media” in China; SINA Weibo alone has had more than 500 million registered users who send 100 million tweets per day.

WeChat, an increasingly popular social media network launched by Tencent, another major Internet content provider in China in 2011, allows users to share information and photos with approved friends. It works differently from Weibo by focusing on information sharing within friendship circles. Besides, on WeChat friends can also do video-chat and send sound clips for free (many interviews for this paper between UK and China were done through WeChat video chatting). Within two years it already boasted more than 300 million users, many of whom are urban middle class.

Thanks to the age of 3G, smartphones and tablets, Chinese journalists can now be online -- and on Weibo and WeChat -- virtually anywhere, anytime.

For Chinese journalists and editors, Weibo and WeChat are not only a realtime database to track breaking news and burning issues, but also a new platform to share their own thoughts and stories. Some popular journalists have up to 100,000 followers on Weibo. For media organizations, especially traditional media, it's a new battlefield to fight for attention.

Like most other countries in this world, it's the age of social media age in China too -- but maybe a little unique. Weibo and WeChat have helped to create a more exciting and vibrant news space for Chinese journalists, and at the same time throw up China-specific challenges to them.

Weibo: “More Exciting” than Twitter?

Since their birth, Weibo and WeChat seem to have more political and journalistic implications than its American counterpart Twitter, as it is the first time Chinese general public can have access to a timely and open platform (although still under control) to share political opinions and exchange political gossips (or rumours).

For many Chinese journalists, as Weibo and WeChat are such rich information resources which never existed before, their way of work has changed. Ms. Y of *Oriental Morning Post* described the change like this:

“Before Weibo, the first thing I did every morning in office was to look through the headlines of major Internet news portals. Now I don't do that anymore -- I read Weibo instead and if any particular news story catches my attention I'll explore it further on the Internet. They are especially useful when there's breaking news -- I can track down witnesses in real time and more effectively. At least half of my news sources now are from Weibo.”

Sun Chun-long, an active Weibo blogger himself with more than 40,000 followers also said: “I've stopped reading newspapers for a while, as Internet news portals and Weibo are good enough for me. And Weibo's very timely -- I can keep abreast of what's happening in real time.”

Another reason journalists are so glued to Weibo and WeChat is probably they are more fun to read than more serious traditional media -- especially on Weibo, Chinese Netizens often creatively come up with self-mocking jokes (*duan zi*, 段子), puns and alternative-wordings to tease politics and government.

Popular Chinese blogger and columnist Michael Anti even argued in his 2012 TED talk that Weibo is “more exciting” than Twitter, in the sense that with the same amount of characters, Chinese is much more expressive than English --140 Chinese characters can make a full news story with all 3 “W”s (where, when, who), while 140 English characters, roughly two sentences, are “at most a headline”.

With Weibo and WeChat's sweeping popularity, some bloggers with large numbers of followers (“Big V” as called in Chinese usually with more than 100,000 fans) on Weibo and WeChat have also launched their own “media”, in which they post their own comments about burning social issues and share with followers. Opinions of these opinion-leaders are then re-tweeted tens of thousands of times, picked up by traditional media and then become a focus of public attention.

Geographically, Weibo and WeChat have also extended beyond Mainland China and spread into “Greater China” (including Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan), and diaspora Chinese all over the world, many of whom not only

have Weibo and WeChat accounts but also actively follow and participate in the political debates. In Ms. X (of Xinhua News Agency)'s opinion, Weibo and WeChat have become “Current China Affairs Debating Societies for All Chinese”.

For Ms. Y of *Oriental Outlook*, the biggest change Weibo and WeChat have brought to the Chinese media landscape is “the single, authoritative information source has been challenged”. At the same time, agenda-setting power has also been partly shifted from an elite group of policy-makers and “mainstream media” to more grassroots bloggers and the general public.

“Debate without a Chair”

Despite all the exciting changes Weibo and WeChat have brought, there are also numerous challenges to be addressed. For almost all the interviewed journalists, a shared strong concern is the rampant spread of “fake news”.

Ms. S of *Oriental Outlook* said Weibo is “often irrational” – “unconfirmed sources fly high, together with complete rumours”. Ms. Y of *Oriental Morning Post*, on the other hand, described it as “debate without a chair”: “<when reading Weibo> you have to judge with caution and then form your own opinion, as anybody can voice their views, and you can easily get drowned in a sea of information.”

Another concern is that with the growing popularity of Weibo and WeChat, they also become increasingly loaded with “Chinese characteristics”. For example, on SINA Weibo, there is a “Little Secretary” watching tweets closely, filtering “sensitive words” and taking away tweets “not suitable for public knowledge”.

A better example is the “Fifty-Cent Party” (*Wumao Dang*, 五毛党) -- a term coined by Chinese netizens to refer to a group of Internet commentators hired by government propaganda departments to post comments favourable towards party policies in an attempt to shape public opinion on various Internet message boards.

As a result, Ms. Y said now she “talks less and less about politics and current affairs, and more and more about urban life and celebrity gossips”, and Weibo on the whole tends to be “boring”.

“What Weibo brings about, is more changes in how information is disseminated, rather than real enlightenment”, she said. And the over-popularity of Weibo may have a negative influence on young journalists, she contended -- “some of them place too much attention on attracting followers and making themselves ‘famous’ in virtual space by acting sensational, instead of focusing on writing quality journalism pieces and taking social responsibility.”

Her worry was echoed by Yoshikazu Kato, who saw Weibo becoming increasingly “chaotic”, “full of self-bragging” and “depriving young people of the opportunities to think independently, calmly and rationally”, although “it brings more advantages than disadvantages in a longer-term view”.

Ms.J of *South China Morning Post* who has done a 6-month research project on Weibo and investigative journalism in China concluded: “ultimately it is a kind of democratization: democratization with Chinese characteristics.”

Future: Half Optimistic, Half Uncertain

With such a mixed picture, will Weibo and WeChat stay popular in the years to come and bring about substantial changes to the Chinese media landscape?

Chinese journalists and editors seemed to have mixed feelings about this. Among the ten interviewees, five are very “optimistic”, four said “uncertain” and one was downright pessimistic.

Sun Chun-long, a passionate optimist about Weibo, stressed that “fake news” is not a result of Weibo and WeChat – “and on Weibo they are actually corrected faster than in print media, as bloggers are constantly cross-checking on each other.”

Also, he noticed since last year a longer version of the 140-character tweet – “Long Weibo” (bloggers write a long article and post the whole page on Weibo as a snapshot) is becoming more and more popular. “This is a promising change -- it helps people exchange ‘profound’ ideas rather than fragmental information. I've posted quite a lot of Long Weibo this year and they are very well received.”

In the end, there will be other new media forms taking the place of Weibo and WeChat, “just like how Weibo took over blogging”. “But for now and the near

future, Weibo will still be the most influential and popular media platform in China”, he said.

However, Ms. Y of *Oriental Morning Post*, on a pessimistic note, thought Weibo is “unreal democratization -- more chaotic than orderly and more troublesome than useful”.

Sam Geall, on the other hand, pointed out that the future of Weibo and WeChat to a large extent would depend on the government's attitude: “They are now standing at a junction. Whether the government will allow more information transparency, or keep the narrow thinking of ‘maintaining social stability’ and constraining discussion will be critical.”

According to Yoshikazu Kato, “Most important, Weibo and WeChat should be allowed to be just social media -- a platform, or a channel. Right now they are too heavily loaded. And I hope Chinese media and intellectual community will reflect on a more important issue after all the discussions about Weibo and WeChat: how to institutionalize political debates in China?”

Chapter 5 Conclusions

For Chinese journalists, neither dancing with shackles nor being a hybrid journalist is an easy job. And the financial return is not great either. Some of them have left the profession, but most are still trying their best to keep calm and carry on, even at the price of fighting battles at two levels – both journalistically and ethically.

This observation was shared by Judy Polumbaum, journalism professor and Chinese media watcher of University of Iowa, who talked to twenty Chinese journalists for her book “China Ink: The Changing Face of Chinese Journalism”. What she could feel was that they “relish going into battle each day” even when feeling “beleaguered, weary and under-appreciated”¹⁶.

What keeps them going is the belief that tomorrow will be better. Among the ten interviewed Chinese journalists and editors in this paper, despite all the tribulations and frustrations, five are still “optimistic” about the future of journalism in China, four are “uncertain but hopeful”, and only one is “pessimistic”.

For them, the future is an uncertain picture with both great hopes and daunting challenges, but they don’t seem want to take an easy route.

“I hope journalism can help change China’s fate, as it is one of the most powerful forces”, Sun Chun-long said.

Biggest Challenge: Lack of Professionalism

When talking about future challenges, “professional” is the most constantly mentioned word by Chinese journalists -- they hope both the Chinese journalists become more “professional”, and media organizations could be managed in a more “professional” way.

Ms. S of *Oriental Outlook* recalled a conversation with her boss a few years ago about her future career path:

¹⁶ Judy Polumbaum and Xiong Lei, “China Ink: The Changing Face of Chinese Journalism” (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 9

“I told him I wanted to be a journalist for the rest of my life, and his reaction was: ‘how would you feel if you're a journalist of 35 and have to go to press conferences with a group of 25-year-old kids?’”

Her boss, out of “kind concern”, was trying to convince her that it's probably a better idea to follow the career path of “journalist - editor - chief editor” and all the way up, even if she enjoyed the frontline excitement.

Neither wanting to sit in the office just editing articles, nor happy with a future of competing with 25-year-old kids, Ms.S finally decided to leave the profession.

“My observation is that a large number of Chinese journalists choose to take their exits between the age of 30 and 35 -- the age they just start to become ‘professional’, either woeful about the pay, or just hating to be surrounded by young kids,” she said.

Sun Chun-long further summarized it as “Chinese media is still a youth industry”, and “the biggest challenge facing Chinese media now (among others) is a lack of mature journalists and real professionalism”.

“Most frontline journalists are under 30, and many of them are fresh graduates from university. It takes a long time before a journalist can build up the level of confidence to speak on an equal footing with interviewees. But sadly now in China, journalists over 30 often feel they are too old to be running on the frontline”, he said.

Ms. Y of *Oriental Morning Post* said she hoped Chinese media organizations could be operated in a more "professional" way too.

For example, there should be stimulus packages to encourage journalists to stay on the frontline as long as they wish -- right now many journalists, even though still aspiring to do ground-breaking reports, have to join the “journalism bureaucracy” at some point because journalists are under-paid.

Also, in most Chinese media, training opportunities are still limited, and journalists and editors often have to search and strive for such chances themselves (and negotiate sabbatical terms), instead of being trained at the arrangement of their organizations.

They also tend to look up to Western big names and local liberal media as “role models” in “professionalism”.

The cited global names include *New York Times*, *Economist*, *Financial Times* and the *BBC*. Among Chinese media, liberal brands such as *Southern Weekend* and *Caijin* and *Caixin* get the most votes.

End Note: Their Hopes...

So what are their hopes for the future?

Ms.X of Xinhua News Agency said she hopes Chinese journalism can go from a “hybrid” value system to “a single value system that media should be professional, fair and decent”.

Ms.S of *Oriental Outlook* hopes “Chinese media can be more mature and professional organizations with more freedom of speech”. She also hopes journalism can “become a ‘higher quality’ profession in which journalists can stay for life and become real experts in their beats.”

“China is standing at a juncture of whether the government will allow more free-flowing information like in 2008 before the Olympics, or go back to maintain social stability in the narrow sense. I’m optimistic about journalists trying to push limits and doing quality stories, and a bit uncertain about the government’s commitment to improving the media environment,” China commentator Sam Geall says.

Another close Chinese media watcher Yoshikazu Kato thinks real change will lie with the journalists and editors themselves. “As a Japanese citizen, I’m well aware of the critical role intellectuals can play when a country is standing at a crossing -- whether they can remain independent and critical can actually decide where the country is going,” he says.

This generation of Chinese journalists with hybrid values therefore will be of exceptional importance for the future development of Chinese media, and although reality is harsh, the future seems hopeful. As Judy Polumbaum eloquently puts it¹⁷:

“Even when they are scrambling, they have a sense of history and progress. Even while sharing woes, they emanate optimism and fortitude. The

¹⁷ July Polumbaum and Xiong Lei, “China Ink: The Changing Face of Chinese Journalism” (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 9

nitty-gritty of their jobs might tire them out but doesn't grind them down; where the present seems confusing or dismaying, they take a long view... They've given us a tour of the terrain in times of transition, bringing to the surface contradictions and quandaries faced by Chinese intellectuals during a period of dizzying change.”

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Appendix 1 Interviewees List

**Interviewees are listed in the order of their interview time. At the request of most interviewees, the names shown here are just the initial letter of their surname.*

Name	Gender	Media Organization	Position	Working Years
Ms. Y	Female	Oriental Morning Post (Daily)	Journalist	5
Ms. S	Female	Oriental Outlook (Weekly)	Journalist	7
Mr. W	Male	Economy Monthly (Monthly)	Editor	15
Ms. G	Female	Xinhua News Agency (News Agency)	Journalist	7
Ms. X	Female	Xinhua News Agency (News Agency)	Editor	9
Ms. Z	Female	Oriental Morning Post (Daily)	Journalist	6
Sun Chun-long	Male	Xi'an Evening News & Oriental Outlook (Daily & News Weekly)	Assistant Editor-in-chief	12
Ms. Z	Female	Shanghai Dragon TV (Broadcasting)	Journalist	8
Ms. J	Female	South China Morning Post (Daily)	Journalist	9
Mr. C	Male	China News Weekly (Weekly, freelance now)	Journalist	10

Appendix 2 Interview Questions

1. How long have you been in journalism? What are your proudest achievements so far, and what are your biggest challenges in work?
2. Can you describe your professionalism values? If you believe in more than one value, do list them all.
3. Have you ever taken "red envelope"? Do you think it's right and will it jeopardize your journalistic judgment?
4. Are you happy with your salary? Do you think you are "middle class"?
5. Do you love China? Do you think it's journalists' responsibility to defend national interests? Do you have any Chinese traditional literati values, as a modern globalized journalist?
6. Have you ever done any "internal reporting" and do you endorse such a reporting form?
7. In what ways have Weibo and WeChat changed your way of work?
8. In your opinion, what are the challenges facing Weibo and WeChat? Are you generally optimistic or pessimistic (or other) about the future of Weibo and WeChat?
9. In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges for Chinese media -- media control, lack of professionalism, over-commercialization, or others?
10. Do you have a role model media organization you highly respect? With all the challenges and uncertainties, are you generally optimistic, pessimistic (or other) about the future of journalism in China? And what are your biggest wishes for the future development of Chinese media?

