

Investigative Journalism and Political Power in China

Five Newspapers' Reporting of the Chenzhou Mass
Corruption Case, February 2004–November 2008

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Members of the Hong Kong Journalists Association hold a banner during a protest in support of press freedom outside the Chinese liaison office in Hong Kong September 7, 2009. Three Hong Kong TV journalists—TVB senior reporter Lam Tsz-ho, his cameraman Lau Wing-chuan and Now TV cameraman Lam Chun-wai—covering the Urumqi unrest said they were detained, handcuffed and roughed up by armed police on Friday, according to local media reports.
REUTERS/Tyrone Siu

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ABSTRACT: It has long been held in the West that investigative journalism presents itself as an adversary to officialdom, exposing problems in the public domain and demanding a response from public officials. However, since much of the literature is based on experiences in the US and the UK, the way in which Chinese investigative journalists interact with politicians is not represented sufficiently.

This working paper begins by asking whether or not investigative journalism in China takes the same adversarial position towards officialdom as do its Western counterparts and, if not, what the relationship looks like. Through a case study of the reporting of a massive official corruption case, the working paper concludes that Chinese investigative journalism operates in a patron–client framework and that it reinforces this relationship by transmitting the voice of the politically powerful and forming a favourable image of them in exchange for political protection, economic profit and individual gain.

Keywords: investigative journalism, clientelism, media and politics, Chinese media, corruption

1. Introduction

Investigative journalism in Western countries such as the US and UK is now in deep crisis because of cuts to newsroom budgets; yet it is experiencing a golden age in some other parts of the world, such as South America (Waisbord 2000) and China (de Burgh 2003a). In the Western tradition, investigative journalists have been described as ‘custodians of conscience’ (Ettema and Glasser 1998) who watch for flaws in social systems and the public domain. By exposing problems and mobilising public opinion, which in turn demands the response of public officials, this genre of journalism often acts as a monitor of the powerful and positions itself as an adversary of officialdom (ibid.; Protesse *et al.* 1991; Aucoin 2005).

However, transplanted to and developed in a Communist, authoritarian political structure like China, where the media are hardly independent from politics, will investigative journalism still hold an adversarial position? If not, what can be the relationship between Chinese investigative journalism and politics? And how has this relationship shifted as a result of China’s media reform? These are the issues this study¹ tries to address.

*

Modern investigative journalism emerged in China in the late 1970s as a consequence of economic reform and media marketisation (Zhao 2000; Haggard 1992). Since then, there has been a proliferation of investigative reports in newspapers, magazines and on television nationwide. The topics range from official wrongdoing, police brutality, illegal labourers and unlawful business to corruption and crime. The popularity and frequency of this brand of reportage have grown rapidly. Yet, in common with many aspects of the Chinese media, the practice of investigative journalism is surrounded by contradictions and ambiguities (Lee 1994, 2000; Zhao 1998, 2000). On the one hand, the monopoly which the Communist Party retains on ownership defines a partisan role for the Chinese media – including investigative journalism – and dictates that it will support the goals and practices of the party. But on the other hand, driven by economic independence and a professional imperative, journalists value the liberal ideal of the media as a ‘fourth estate’, separate from the government.

The operation of these conflicting forces has created a unique situation. Journalists view themselves as monitors of power (de Burgh 2003a, 2003b, 2003c); several newspapers and television programmes in their publicity slogans even clearly vow to ‘challenge authority’ or to be the ‘watchdogs of society’²; in some cases, they claim to have successfully fulfilled this role, and indeed their reports have on occasion led to changes in public policy and the law.³ Yet, leaving aside the claimed results and taking a look at the process, the way in which investigative journalism has been practised and the reports produced seem to suggest a less optimistic assessment. A ubiquitous political grip has pulled Chinese investigative journalists far from the ideal of watchdogs of society.

¹ See Acknowledgment.

² For example: *Focal Interview* and *News Probe* of China Central Television; the Beijing-based *Beijing News*, *Caijing Magazine* and *News Weekly*; the Guangzhou-based *Southern Metropolitan Daily* and *Southern Weekend*.

³ An often cited example is the Sun Zhigang case, published by the Guangzhou-based *Southern Metropolitan Daily* in 2003. Sun, a university graduate, was beaten to death by the police in a detention camp. The newspaper published an outright investigative story which condemned the country’s decade-old detention law. It successfully mobilised public opinion, which in the end led to the abolition of the law by the State Council.

To illuminate the relationship between politics and the media involved in the practice of investigative journalism in China, this working paper will first examine the shifting dynamic before and after the media reform, and the context in which the new genre of investigative journalism arose. In particular, it will look at the theory of media clientelism and its implications for the study of current Chinese investigative journalism and politics. Then it will study the reportage of a recent and very large corruption case. This, the Chenzhou mass corruption case (Chenzhou is a medium-sized city in central China's Hunan province), has been described as one of the most extraordinary corruption cases – it led to the downfall of the largest number of local officials (158, including party chief/mayor, disciplinary chief and deputy mayor) – brought to light in China since the turn of the new millennium. I will focus on the following aspects: how is political influence imposed on investigative journalism? How do journalists respond to political pressure? What is the nature of the interaction between these two, and how, in turn, does this interaction affect the reporting of corruption? My research methods include a content analysis of the investigative reports in five selected newspapers and follow-up interviews with eight journalists. The coding schedule and coding manual used are reproduced in the Appendices.

2. Conceptualisation

2.1. *The relationship between media and politics*

A growing body of literature in the West has been critically evaluating the relationship between media and politics. Much of the literature is based on experiences in the US, the UK and West European nations, though some has dealt with former communist countries in eastern and central Europe. But the way in which Chinese media interact with politics in the post-reform era is not represented sufficiently. Compared with the former communist countries in eastern and central Europe, China has taken a unique path – by introducing market mechanisms into its media reform without any fundamental change in its political structure (Zhao 1998; Pan 2000; Lee *et al.* 2006). This uniqueness raises a theoretical challenge: what kind of new dimension in the media–politics relationship has been brought in as a consequence of media reform?

Before answering this question, let us examine the conventional relationship between media and politics in China. Traditionally, China's media system is built upon the idea that the media is an instrument by which the party propagates its policy and ideology. Journalists were assigned to play their role as a mouthpiece of the party and propagandists of communist indoctrination (Lee 1990). As described in Siebert *et al.*'s classic *Four Theories of the Press* (1963), the press system in the world was divided into four categories, one of which was called the 'Soviet-Communist' model. In this, the government owns the media and uses it for its own, greater causes: China, as a communist regime, shares that view. Based on this instrumental ideology, a set of practices has been accepted as basic principles for journalists. These include: serving the interests of the party and government, being faithful to the communist ideology, promoting government policy, reporting positively, avoiding negativity, accepting the supervision and censorship of the party's propaganda unit, and so on. Politics and media were in a master–servant relationship: the media unconditionally served the interests of politics, and politics commandingly prescribed assignments for the media.

The economic reform and the subsequent media marketisation, which started in the late 1970s and was accelerated in the 1990s, have significantly undermined the traditional politics–media dynamic. Along with the withdrawal of state subsidies, the media were forced to start commercial operations by carrying advertisements, expanding their audience and competing with each other. These measures have inevitably brought to the fore the tensions between the party press principles and market forces (Pan 2000; Zhao 1998; Lee 1994; Polunbaum 1990), and subsequently led to the changes in the role of media and in media–politics relationships. These changes are very substantial: the question is, whether they are fundamental and lasting, or not.

At the risk of simplifying current debate on the contemporary configuration of media–politics relationships in China, there are two dominant views. One is the 'two masters' argument, that the reform of Chinese media since the late 1970s, characterised by withdrawal of state subsidies, has led to the tension of the media having to serve two masters, the party and the market (Polunbaum 1990); or, in other words, to adhere simultaneously to 'the party line and the bottom (market) line' (Zhao 1998). The other is the 'Party Publicity Inc.' analysis, which states that Chinese media are experiencing a tug-of-war, pulled one way by the forces of politics and another by those of the market economy; and that the logic of this struggle is gradually transforming the party press from propaganda instruments to a 'Party Publicity Inc.' (He 2000; Lee *et al.* 2006). 'Unlike the old propaganda

instruments served by the party press for decades, the new “Inc.” is oriented more toward political publicity – promoting the image of the party and justifying its legitimacy – than toward ideological brainwashing and conversion.’ (He 2000: 143–4)

Both theories, the ‘two masters’ and ‘Party Publicity Inc.’, have emphasised that the market dimension in the reformed media operation has made the media–politics relationship more complicated than before. Yet underlying both is the view that China’s media reform merely offers ‘a new bottle’ (media marketisation or conglomeration) for ‘the old wine’ (ideological control), and that the politics–media relationship still keeps the old master–servant kernel, even if it wears a less authoritarian coat.

Both the ‘two masters’ and ‘Party Publicity Inc.’ analyses substitute the concept of clientelism, a softer politics–media relationship, for the former rigid, top-down system. Clientelism refers to ‘a pattern of social organisation in which access to social resources is controlled by patrons and delivered to clients in exchange for deference and various kinds of support’ (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002: 184–5). Such patron–client relationships are often particularistic and asymmetric, and involve exchanging different types of resources, especially instrumental, economic and political ones on the one hand, and promises of solidarity and loyalty on the other (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1981; Lee *et al.* 2007). Specifically on media–political clientelism, political parties often act as patrons, the media as clients. The former control the political and economic resources and allocate them to the media in exchange for loyalty, while media owners use their properties as a vehicle for negotiation with other elites and intervention in the political world.

The concept of clientelism is of broad relevance to the understanding of media systems worldwide, in Latin America, southern and eastern Europe, the Middle East and much of Africa and Asia. It was first adopted in media studies by Hallin and his colleagues (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002; Hallin and Mancini 2004), in their international comparative studies of media in southern European and Latin American countries where liberal democracy is still influenced by past authoritarian traditions. It was also introduced to the study of media in China. In seeking to explain why Shanghai, China’s economic capital, has such a disproportionately timid media, Lee *et al.* (2007) examined the political economy of the city media from the perspective of clientelism. It was found that the tameness of Shanghai’s media is ‘maintained through a clientelistic network with all media clients beholden to one single power patron’ (*ibid.*: 38): because of this, the media are governed and controlled with high efficiency.

Although particularly dominant in some regions, such as Shanghai, media clientelism is a phenomenon across all genres of journalism in China and investigative journalism is no exception. Unlike in the Western ‘muckraking’ model, where adversarial relationships between muckrakers and politicians are common, relations between Chinese investigative journalists and the authorities may be just the opposite. In fact, investigative journalism in China is to a very large degree a product of political necessity: that of the central party leadership facing increasing social pressure and a corrupt bureaucracy over which it no longer has effective control (Zhao 2000: 577). By exposing problems that have been officially denounced, by calling individual transgressors to account and by drawing attention to the need for specific reforms, investigative journalism transmits the party’s voice and strengthens the party’s hegemony. In so doing, it smooths the rough edges of the ongoing Chinese transformation and polices the political, economic and social boundaries of an emerging authoritarian market society (*ibid.*). In turn, the media attain political protection and economic profits, and individual

journalists gain recognition for their stories and upward movement on the political hierarchy ladder (Yin and Wang 2007). These pressures and relationships are at the heart of the development of investigative journalism in China.

2.2. Chinese investigative journalism

Journalists and academics have observed that the vigour of investigative journalism has been one of the most important and novel developments in the contemporary Chinese media (e.g. Zhao 2000; de Burgh 2003a; de Burgh 2005). Several scholars trace the emergence of this new genre of reporting from the late 1970s, immediately after the end of ideological debates between the Dengists and the Maoists and the launching of economic reform policy (Zhao 2000; Haggard 1992). Then journalism experienced a short period of boom in the 1980s, lasting until the failure of the Tiananmen pro-democracy movement in 1989: its influence declined thereafter. Only by the mid-1990s, as China temporarily stopped the ideological debates about 'socialism versus capitalism', released market forces and accelerated economic reform, did a space reemerge for investigative journalism.

For the communist period from 1949, the Chinese media has for the most part served as a propaganda instrument for the Chinese Communist Party: critical and in-depth reporting was shunned. The situation today is markedly different: investigative reports, in print and broadcast, have markedly increased. China Central Television's *Focal Interview*, launched in April 1994, gave constant exposure to official corruption and to the adverse social, moral and environmental consequences of market reforms and the grievances of ordinary people, and it became the country's most popular investigative programme (de Burgh 2003a). In print media, the Guangzhou-based *Southern Weekend* – regarded as 'the conscience of Chinese society' – serves as a paradigm of investigative journalism (Pan 2000). Meanwhile, more and more media outlets, including market-oriented media as well as traditional party organs, assembled investigative reporting teams. Figure 1 is an attempt to draw a profile of the 'top eight' best-known investigative journalism outlets/programmes in China today.

Figure 1: Top eight investigative programmes

Name	Ownership	Launch date	Slogan
Focal Interview	CCTV	04-1994	Truth speaks out
News Probe	CCTV	06-1996	In pursuit of justice
Southern Weekend	Nanfang Daily Group	02-1984	In-depth makes investigation
Freezing Point	China Youth Daily	01-1995	Speak for the disadvantaged
Caijing Magazine	China's Stock Exchange Executive Council	04-1998	Independent standpoint, exclusive coverage and unique perspective
Southern Metropolitan Daily	Nanfang Daily Group	01-1997	The voice of the citizens
China News Weekly	Chinese News Agency	01-2000	Progress with China
Beijing News	Guangming Daily Group	01-2003	Responsible for each report

The rise of investigative journalism in China has attracted much attention both within China and in the outside world. A number of Western observers took a rather optimistic view, hailing this 'muckraking' style of journalism as an ambitious overthrow of the 'turgid, propagandist and rigidly censored programming' (Gordon 1995) and even as a glacial thawing of China's authoritarian media tradition (Rosenthal 1998). It is argued that the appearance of investigative journalism in China 'has shown that what westerners assume to be a manifestation of liberal democracies can flourish in quite a different context' and that Chinese investigative journalists are 'indeed performing the same kind of tasks as their counterparts elsewhere' (de Burgh 2005). This view seems to have been welcomed by the Chinese media: journalists cite Watergate as their professional paradigm and Western investigative journalists such as Bob Woodward as their role models (Pan and Lu 2003); news organisations put claims such as 'challenging authority', 'independent investigations' or 'scrutinising power' in their editorial guidance; and more and more investigative journalists appear to like the idea of being adversaries of officialdom.

However, the picture is perhaps less exciting if we observe the power structure beneath the changes obvious on the surface. Investigative journalism, like other genres of Chinese journalism, is inevitably tightly gripped by politics. It is easily subject to political manipulation, overt or covert, by the party, government and individual officials. Journalists usually tend to lack autonomy, political rather than distinctively journalistic criteria guide the practice of journalism, and media serve particular interests rather than functioning as a public trust. Such journalism is not a watchdog, but 'a watchdog on a party leash' (Zhao 2000) – or even just a lapdog.

2.3. *Official corruption and the Chenzhou case*

This study looks at the reporting of a recent official corruption case as an example of current media–politics relationships. The reason for choosing the reporting of official corruption as a study is that it has traditionally been closely tied to the development of Chinese investigative journalism. Since the economic reforms of the late 1970s, with the opening up of much of the economy to private enterprise, official corruption has become rampant in China and has been reported frequently in the newspapers.⁴ It has particularly attracted the attention of investigative journalism, as this kind of journalism, whose main elements were copied from the West (de Burgh 2003b, 2003c), has as its prime aim holding power to account – and corruption is one of the most salient forms of the abuse of power. Since the beginning of Chinese investigative journalism, corruption reporting has played a defining role. One of the earliest and most influential pieces of investigative reporting in China was a corruption exposure. Investigated by crusading reporter Liu Binyan (1925–2005) in 1979, this report exposed, ‘layer upon layer’, a local official’s bribery, corruption and abuse of power, and was published under the title ‘People or Monsters?’ (Zhao 2000). In a boom of such reports throughout the 1980s, they were generally concerned with reporting official corruption, centring chiefly on ‘administrative–business complexes’ (Zhao 2000: 578) – government officials and administrative units exchanging their public power for personal gain – which was very typical in the early stage of China’s economic reform. In the 1990s, a number of national investigative outlets and programmes became famous because of their frequent reports on corruption. In the first years of the 21st century, Chinese journalists have reported a series of major corruption cases, involving a number of high-level officials. These ‘big names’ include:

Hu Changqing, deputy governor of Jiangxi province
Cheng Kejie, vice chairman of the National Assembly Standing Committee
Li Jiating, governor of Yunnan province
Li Jizhou, deputy minister of national security
Cheng Weigao, party chief of Hebei province
Wang Huaizhong, deputy governor of Anhui province
Wang Zhonglu, deputy governor of Zhejiang province
Tian Fengshan, minister of national resources
Chen Liangyu, party chief, Shanghai
(and many others).

The so-called ‘Chenzhou mass corruption case’, the subject of this study, is among the most recent. It was at the centre of public attention from February 2004, when the first reports appeared in the media, until November 2008, when the corrupt officials were put on trial and received sentences: the whole affair went on for nearly five years.

⁴ Official corruption has been one of the biggest challenges facing the Chinese Communist Party since the economic reform in the late 1970s. It has given rise to problems such as social and political instability and the decreased credibility of the government, and threatened the sovereign rule of the CCP.

In February 2004, a local amateur journalist⁵ exposed Li Shubiao, head of the Administrative Centre for Housing Accumulation Funds of Chenzhou City, of having embezzled in excess of 118 million yuan (US\$17.26 million) in funds apportioned to purchase homes for 200,000 city employees between 1999 and 2004. He used the stolen funds to gamble in Macau and to buy luxurious personal properties. The amateur journalist informed the newspapers in Changsha (the capital city of Hunan province) about this. Although the newspapers that published this story were forced to apologise for the credibility of this news under pressure from the Hunan Propaganda Office, which accused them of circulating negative information without obtaining permission,⁶ they had lifted the lid on massive corruption. Later, from the reports in national and out-of-town media,⁷ it became known that Li Shubiao was in fact under investigation by the anti-corruption authority.⁸ His immediate superior Lei Yuanli, deputy mayor of Chenzhou City, was, soon after, also alleged to be corrupt. Lei, nicknamed 'three-play mayor' – playing with power, money and women – said in his confession to the provincial disciplinary committee that 'I am not the most corrupt. I am ranked only No. 12' (cited in *People's Daily*, 24/10/2006). It was this curious confession that eventually led to the entire collapse of Chenzhou officialdom. Before long, it was revealed that Li Dalun, the party chief of Chenzhou City, was sitting at the apex of a mass corruption case. Among Li's allies was the city's second most important official, Zeng Jinchun, chief of the disciplinary commission. He was soon found to have received bribes of as much as 31.5 million yuan (US\$3.95 million), which made him the most corrupt disciplinary chief in China's history. As the investigation deepened, a total of 158 local officials were found to be corrupt: they received punishments ranging from life imprisonment to suspension from their job.

The Chenzhou mass corruption case resulted in the dismissal of the largest number of officials in China in the new millennium, and was seen by the Communist Party as its major anti-corruption success of recent years (*People's Daily*, 24/10/2006). The media were praised as having played a crucial role. Journalists themselves were even more self-congratulatory. One wrote: 'Who put down Li Dalun, Zeng Jinchun and all these corrupt officials? Journalists from all kinds of media who uphold justice and conscience, who exposed the corruption fearlessly, and urged authorities' action insistently' (Huang 2007). The journalists, however, may have exaggerated their power. Journalists indeed 'reported' the Chenzhou mass corruption case, as they did many other corruption cases. But this does not necessarily mean that journalists have the power to investigate corruption

⁵ The amateur journalist is an important part of Chinese journalism today. He or she is normally a local citizen who earns his/her living outside journalism, but likes to pursue journalism as a second job. He or she provides information to mainstream journalists and sometimes writes for mainstream media about a local topic. The media pay a small fee once the information or an article is used.

⁶ Local media are normally forbidden from conveying negative information about government officials in their region.

⁷ National and out-of-town media are normally not restricted by rules laid down by local government and enjoy more, though still very limited, autonomy. This will be discussed in Chapter 4.

⁸ In order to root out corruption and malfeasance among party officials, the CCP has formed an anti-corruption network, with a Central Disciplinary Commission at the top, twenty-four provincial Disciplinary Commissions in the middle and thousands of local disciplinary commissioners at city or town level at the bottom. Each disciplinary commission is responsible for inspecting the corruption of officials at the level below. The disciplinary commissioners often work together with the corruption prevention police, the procuratorate and courts at different stages. Together they comprise what is called the 'anti-corruption authority' in this study.

independently, and thus influence the authorities' anti-corruption agenda. Journalists may too easily slip into taking a heroic stance, emphasising their accomplishments and stressing how powerful their journalism and their media are in tackling corruption. Therefore, this study also aims to critically evaluate the power of Chinese investigative journalism by looking at the politics-media interaction in this case.

3. Research method

The case study focused on five Chinese newspapers at different administrative levels across four different cities. The *Beijing News* (BJN) in Beijing is a national newspaper, the *Southern Weekend* (SW) and *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (SMD) in Guangzhou are two out-of-town provincial newspapers, and the *Xiaoxiang Morning* (XXM) in Changsha and the *Chenzhou Weekend* (CZW) in Chenzhou are two local papers at municipal level. The method used was a combination of content analysis of the investigative stories directly related to the mass corruption case and follow-up interviews with eight investigative journalists.⁹ The content analysis was to examine the representation of sample stories and the interviews with journalists were to capture in detail how and why each sample story was produced in a particular way. The data gathered from both methods are complementary to each other.

The sample selection spanned 4 years and 9 months, between February 2004 (when the corruption was first reported by the media) and November 2008 (when the sacked officials went to court in the last trial). All related stories published in the 'investigation' pages in the five selected newspapers during the period were included, yielding a total sample of nineteen investigative stories (in 1,349 paragraphs). They were compared and analysed according to three different stages: before the authority's investigation (February 2004 to March 2006), during the authority's investigation (April to September 2006) and after the authority's investigation (October 2006 to November 2008).

With respect to the selection of the newspapers, a detailed explanation should be provided. The five newspapers chosen (see Figure 2) differ in a number of ways, and these differences are closely connected with the issue of the media-politics relationship in the context of China. The most important difference is their respective location on the administrative ladder, shown in the second and third column of Figure 2. Traditionally, the Chinese press system was built upon four different administrative levels: national, provincial, municipal and county levels. National newspapers were administered by the central government or state ministries; provincial papers by the government of each province; municipal papers by the city council; and county papers by the county council. In 2003, newspapers at county level were closed nationwide as a means of media reform. The press structure was transformed from four-level to three-level.

This study chose five newspapers from the three levels in the administrative hierarchy, with *Beijing News* in the national level, *Southern Metropolitan Daily* and *Southern Weekend* at the (out-of-town) provincial level and *Xiaoxiang Morning* and *Chenzhou Weekend* at the municipal level. The administrative levels of the newspapers are generally associated with different levels of access to news sources in the political system, different levels of proximity to the political centre, and at the same time different degrees of political control and different degrees of journalistic autonomy. In general, the higher a news organisation is in the hierarchy, the wider access it has to news sources, the closer it is to surveillance by party officials, but also the greater autonomy its journalists could have (Pan 2000). Another difference among these five newspapers is their different geographic distance from the scene of the event. Generally speaking, the further a news

⁹ The interviewees include an editor and a reporter from the *Beijing News*, an editor and a reporter from the *Southern Weekend*, an editor and a reporter from the *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, a reporter from *Xiaoxiang Morning*, and an editor from *Chenzhou Weekend*. For reasons of confidentiality, I shall not list their names here and I take full responsibility for any errors that occurred in the interpretation and translation.

organisation is from the news story, the fewer the political restrictions and the greater autonomy it has in terms of critical reporting. The corruption case under examination happened in Chenzhou, a middle-sized city in Hunan province, in central China. As shown in the fourth column of Figure 2, the five newspapers are located in Beijing, Guangzhou, Changsha and Chenzhou. Changsha is in the same province as Chenzhou, the scene of the event, and is second closest to the scene, after Chenzhou; Guangzhou is the capital of a neighboring province and a certain distance from Chenzhou; and Beijing in the north is furthest. The circulation area of each paper is coterminous with its geographic location, and has the same political implications.

Despite their differences, the five newspapers have many similarities. First, they are all profit-oriented rather than party-oriented papers. *Beijing News* launched in November 2003 as a joint venture between Guangming Daily Group and Nanfang Daily Group, targeting the high-end newspaper market. Both *Southern Weekend* and *Southern Metropolitan Daily* are offspring papers of the *Nanfang Daily*, a party organ of the Guangdong Provincial Committee of the CCP. Consonant with other market papers run under the so-called 'one system two strategies' model¹⁰ (Huang 2001), *Southern Weekend* and *Southern Metropolitan Daily* operate commercially, with the clear purpose of making a profit and subsidising the financially challenged mother paper. Likewise, *Xiaoxiang Morning*, was started in 2001 by the Hunan Publication Group, aiming at competing for readers and advertising revenues with other papers in the local market; and *Chenzhou Weekend* is a supplement of the party organ *Chenzhou Daily* and also aims to make a profit. Second, they are all young, financially profitable, tabloid-like newspapers that enjoy a certain reputation among their readers for critical reporting in their target region. All these papers, except the very local *Chenzhou Weekend* have assembled investigative reporting teams, and regularly publish tough investigative pieces.

Figure 2: Key information about the five newspapers

<i>Paper</i>	<i>Adm. level</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Distance (miles)</i>	<i>Circulation areas</i>	<i>Circulation</i>
<i>Beijing News</i>	national	Beijing	920	Beijing and beyond	648,000
<i>Southern Weekend</i>	provincial	Guangzhou	400	Guangdong and beyond	1,300,000
<i>Southern Metro Daily</i>	provincial	Guangzhou	400	Guangdong and beyond	1,400,000
<i>Xiaoxiang Morning</i>	municipal	Changsha	300	Hunan Province	520,000
<i>Chenzhou Weekend</i>	municipal	Chenzhou	0	Chenzhou	60,000

Note: Circulation based on each paper's self reporting, as of December 2008.

A coding schedule (see Appendix I) was used after reading each story, which was coded according to three major variables: the theme, the position and the usage of sources. Two independent coders, a Chinese-speaking media researcher and I, were involved in the coding work. A coding manual was discussed and agreed upon by the two coders, then 10 per cent of the stories were coded by the two

¹⁰ Due to the rapid commercialisation of China's media industry, the authorities have developed two sets of media strategies for dealing with the pervasive financial difficulties of the party press. On the one hand, they continue to force the party paper to follow orthodox party journalism – to serve the party's and the government's policies in a straightforward way. On the other hand, they give consent to the party press's publication of tabloid-like metropolitan papers to make a profit and subsidise the mother paper. (Huang 2001)

independent coders. The results were tested with the Holsti formula (Holsti 1969); the reliability coefficient was found at 0.90 for the overall average. Following the content analysis, the semi-structured interviews were conducted through Microsoft Messenger, an online talking tool, in March 2009. Each interview lasted for 1–2 hours, depending on how the discussion proceeded, and was conducted, recorded and transcribed into Chinese to be analysed.

4. Findings

4.1. Reporting autonomy

It is probably true that the Chinese media have now gained some autonomy in reporting official corruption. However, the degree of autonomy varies, both between media outlets and over time.

Let us first look at the general information culled from the samples. During the five-year period under study, two local newspapers, *Chenzhou Weekend* and *Xiaoxiang Morning*, carried no investigations on the case, compared to six each in *Southern Weekend* and *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, the two out-of-town newspapers based in the neighboring city Guangzhou, and seven in the national newspaper *Beijing News*. Much attention was given to the post-investigation stage, with ten articles being published in this period, while five were published before the authority's investigation began and four during it.

Figure 3: Number of investigations published by each newspaper

Paper Stage	CZW	XXM	SW	SMD	BJN	
Stage I	0	0	0	0	5	5 (26%)
Stage II	0	0	1	2	1	4 (21%)
Stage III	0	0	5	4	1	10 (53%)
	0	0	6	6	7	19 (100%)

These figures raise two immediate questions, which were dealt with in the interviews. One is the difference among the newspapers, the other the variation in the number of reports across the different stages of the case. First, why did the two local newspapers publish no investigations at all about Chenzhou corruption throughout the five years? Among the three options (i.e. political consideration, economic consideration and professional consideration), political consideration is the answer chosen by all seven interviewees. Specifically, it was because of a ban by the 'furious' propaganda office of Hunan province, where Chenzhou is situated, issued the day after the first media report (Luo 2008). On 13 February 2004, *Xiaoxiang Morning* and three other local newspapers in Changsha carried a similar apology on their front page, which read: 'We apologise to our readers for the article published in our newspaper yesterday about Li Shubiao gambling public money in Macau. The article is seriously inconsistent with the facts. No reproduction or reference is permitted. ...' (*Xiaoxiang Morning*, 13/02/2004). At the centre of the event was the news that Li Shubiao, head of the Administrative Centre for Housing Accumulation Funds of Chenzhou City, had embezzled and gambled away millions of dollars-worth of funds apportioned to purchase homes for 200,000 city employees. The newspapers in Changsha, including *Xiaoxiang Morning*, were leaked this information by the police and published it. However, according to a witness at a Hunan propaganda office meeting, 'a propaganda officer pounded the table angrily. He fiercely accused the editors who let this kind of negative official news be published, like scolding his own children' (Luo 2008). And so the next day, all three newspapers received a ban on reporting and were forced to apologise for the 'incorrect' news published on their front page. The ban was circulated to all media outlets in Hunan province and the latter did not dare

break it for the entire period until the end of the case.

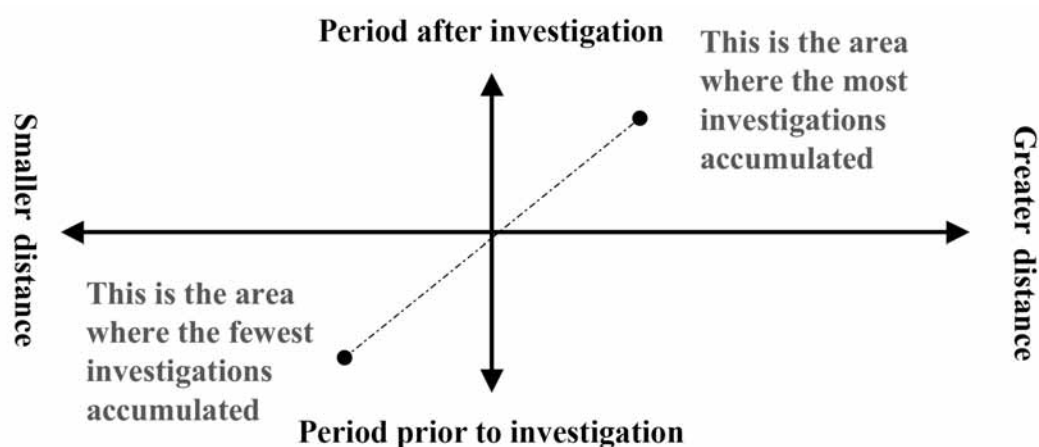
However, the out-of-town newspapers *Southern Weekend* and *Southern Metropolitan Daily* and the national newspaper *Beijing News*, which are not controlled by the Hunan propaganda office, were not influenced by the ban and acted differently. That is why they each published several investigations dealing with the corruption case.

Second, why were most media investigations published after instead of before or during the official investigation? Again, 'political consideration' was the main answer given, five out seven interviewees choosing this option. The interviewees see corruption reporting as highly sensitive politically, although it boosts their personal fame and their newspaper's reputation and sales figures. The sensitivity is extremely high when the authorities have not finished their official investigation and drawn a conclusion, and therefore is deemed risky if the media try to report on the case during this period. After the official investigations, the authorities' attitude towards media becomes more tolerant, partly because the party itself has a need to publicise its anti-corruption success as a means to win support from the people and reinforce its sovereignty. To walk a fine line between political sensitivity and market and professional temptation, journalists choose to report more in the politically safer stage, less in the riskier stage.

Accordingly, a general pattern as to how media investigations of official corruption approached their task can be drawn as in Figure 4.¹¹ The findings were plotted in relation to two factors, time and space, shown in the vertical axis and horizontal axis respectively. On the 'time' axis, the longer after the incident of corruption, the more media investigations are published. On the 'space' axis, the further a media organisation is from the location of the corruption, the more media investigations are conducted. As a result, the upper right-hand area is where the most media investigations accumulate, whereas the bottom left is where the least accumulate. To put it another way, media autonomy on corruption reporting is dependent on both 'time' and 'space'. The 'time' dimension refers to the relationship between the timing of reporting and media autonomy. The tighter the timing, the less autonomy the media has. The 'space' dimension indicates the relationship between the geographical distance of a media organisation (from the corruption scene) and its autonomy in investigating official corruption cases. The smaller the distance, the less autonomy the media has. More importantly, as mentioned in previous chapters, geographical distance between a media organisation and the scene of the reported corruption affects the degree of political interference. The greater the geographical distance between the administrative government of a media organisation and the administrative government of the corrupt scene, the less political interference is likely to happen and the more autonomy media are likely to have.

¹¹ The design of this figure was inspired by the 'two axes of journalism' chart in Sparks, C. (2000), 'Introduction: The Panic over Tabloid News', in Sparks, C. and Tulloch, J. (eds), *Tabloid Tales: Global Debates over Media Standards*, Rowman: Littlefield Publishers, pp. 1–40.

Figure 4: Two axes of autonomy



4.2. Use of sources

The use of sources indicates to whom the media have given a voice, and to what extent one source could have a stronger voice than the others. The examination of this variable has suggested that the media are mainly transmitting the voice of the anti-corruption authorities above all other groups.

The sources of the media investigations in this study were divided into five categories: anti-corruption authorities; corrupt officials; non-corrupt local officials; local citizens and businessmen; and observers whose personal, political and economic interests are not directly affected by the corruption case. Based on a straightforward count of all quotations in each report, including both direct and indirect references, the nineteen investigations used an average of 37 quotations per item, with 14 quotes from anti-corruption authorities, 5 quotes from corrupt officials, 10 quotes from non-corrupt local officials, 5 quotes from local citizens and businessmen, and 3 quotes from observers (see Figure 5). Clearly, the anti-corruption authorities are the most frequent source quoted.

Figure 5: Usage of sources¹²

Sources Quotes	Anti-corruption authorities	Corrupt officials	Local officials	Local citizens	Observers	Total
Average	14	5.32	9.74	5.32	2.68	37.5
Overall	266	101	185	101	51	704

The same result was obtained in the comparison across the newspapers and stages. To take the newspapers (see Figure 6), anti-corruption authorities are quoted 81 times in *Southern Weekend*, 89 in *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, and 96 in the *Beijing News*, compared to only 24, 19 and 48 respectively for the corresponding local citizens. Comparing across time periods (Figure 7), the division in source use is even more dramatic. Particularly in the third phrase, the anti-corruption authorities gained overwhelmingly, with 149 (44%) out of the total 337 quotations used, compared to only 22 (6.5%) chances given to the local citizens.

¹² Please note that all figures in the text are rounded up whereas those in the table provide the precise average.

Figure 6: Usage of sources (comparison across papers)

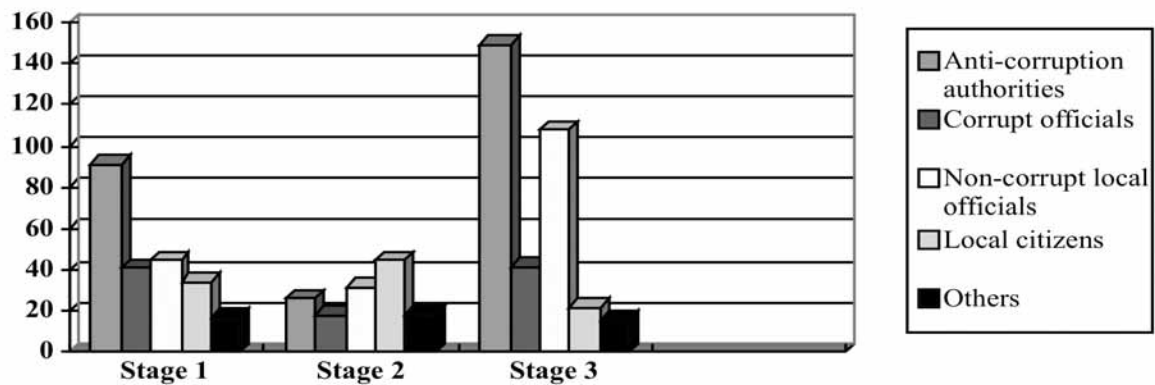
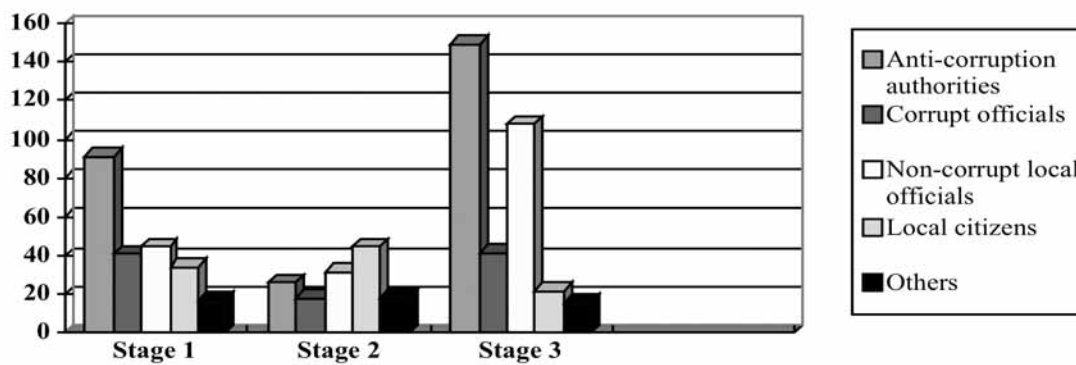


Figure 7: Usage of sources (comparison across stages)



4.3. Theme and position

Apart from the text in which the use of a source has been counted, this study has also considered the dominant theme of each investigation and the position it takes, with the aim of finding out for whom the media investigations speak.

The nineteen investigations cover four different themes: an individual corruption case; portraits of corrupt officials; anti-corruption action; and rebuilding official credibility. Most investigations – 9 out of 19 – focused on portraying corrupt officials, 3 on individual corruption cases, 4 on anti-corruption actions and 3 on rebuilding official credibility (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Themes

Theme \ Stage	Individual corruption case	Portrait of corrupt officials	Anti-corruption action	Rebuilding official credibility	
Stage I	3	2	0	0	5
Stage II	0	4	0	0	4
Stage III	0	3	4	3	10
	3	9	4	3	19

'Position' here refers to the attitude, values and judgment the news report takes in addressing the main theme. Position is evaluated according to the classification method of the use of sources. The five sources – anti-corruption authorities, corrupt officials, non-corrupt local officials, local citizens, and observers – are simultaneously the key players in the news event. They struggle for their voice to be heard as well as their agenda to be reflected. Since this is a fairly subjective evaluation, three relevant reporters were invited to assist coding in order to increase the credibility of the data. The result is based on agreement across the coders.

We found that all the investigations under the 'portrait of corrupt officials' theme took the side of the anti-corruption authorities, together with most (2 out of 3) of the investigations under the 'individual corruption case' theme and half (2 out of 4) under the 'anti-corruption action' theme. In total, 13 (68.4%) out of 19 media investigations took the side of anti-corruption authorities (see Figure 9). As to the investigations under the 'rebuilding official credibility' theme, the attitude of the reportage is evident in the title and it is the case that the investigations under this theme are all presented in a very one-sided way. There is one further investigation under the 'anti-corruption action' theme which takes the non-corrupt local officials' side, making it the second dominant position next to that of the anti-corruption authorities (4 out of 19). Local citizens and businessmen are given the most prominent role in only two investigations. One concerns an individual corruption case and the other is about the story of three local citizens who have constantly appealed to the authorities and media, calling their attention to cases of corruption for nearly eight years.

To sum up, no matter which measurement is used, we see that media investigations about corruption are dominated, first, by the anti-corruption authorities and, second, by local officials. Ordinary citizens with little political power have correspondingly little influence in the media reports, although they played a major role in combating the corruption.

Figure 9: Position taken by article

Position	Anti-corruption authorities	Corrupt officials	Local officials	Local citizens	Observers	Total
Number of Articles	13	0	4	2	0	19

Figure 10: Positions (comparison across papers)

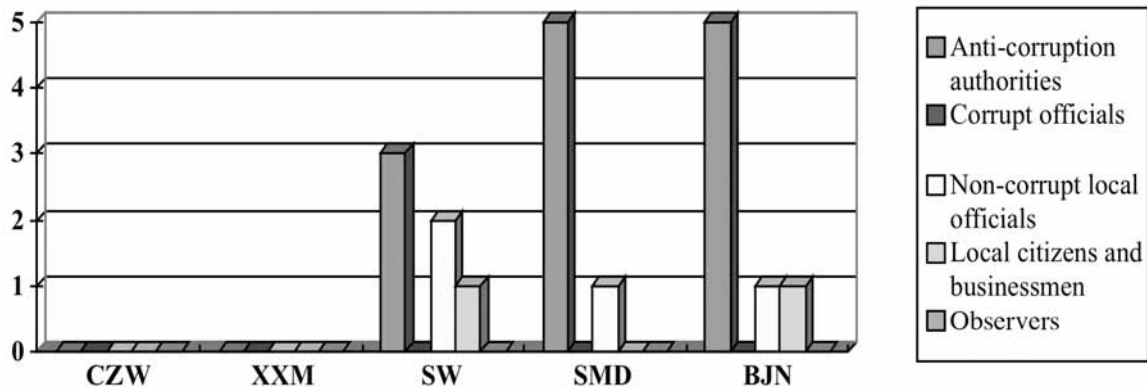
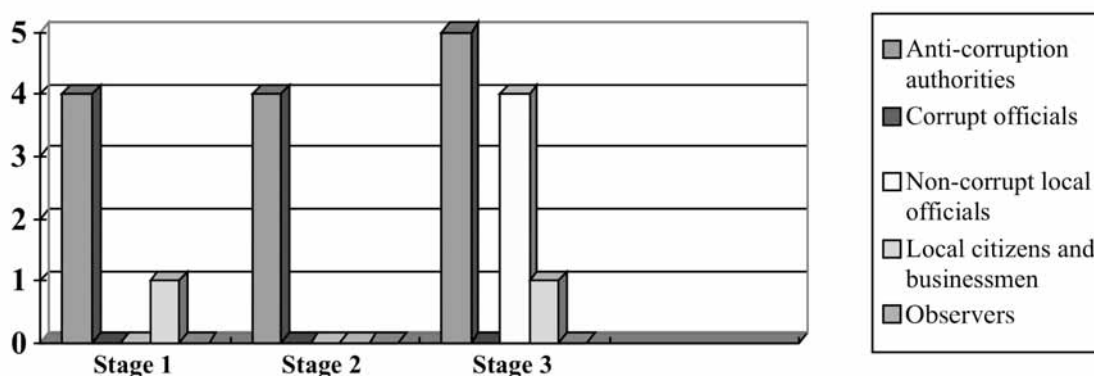


Figure 11: Positions (comparison across stages)



4.4. Politics and media

Having examined the general pattern of reporting, together with its sources, themes and positions, we now move to take a closer look at how investigations are conducted and represented in detail. I want to look at the way the powerless ordinary citizens and the powerful authorities are quoted and portrayed, in order to see how and to what extent politics could influence media reports.

When talking about how the paper's two-page award-winning report 'Anti-corruption Iron Fist Terminated Seven Years of Official Malfeasance' on 21 September 2006 was reported, editor X of the *Southern Weekend* praised the importance of local citizens:

We started (our investigation) from the local informants. You know, there is a unique phenomenon in China. In almost every city and town there is a kind of local informant who provides news clues to the media. Whatever happened, corruption or any other bad things, he or she will call the media to scrutinise. We have close connections with them. In Chenzhou we found one who is called Wu. He told our reporters a lot of things. What's more, he introduced us to more than 20 other informants. They were all strongly against the officials' corruption problem. They know what has been going on over the years. Most of them were ordinary citizens. The materials our reporters collected from them piled up to 1 metre.¹³

However, contrary to what editor X said, local citizens did not become the most frequently quoted source in the final article in the newspaper, although they were the most important informants and provided most facts on corruption to the reporters. Neither were their interviews and comments the source for the main theme, nor were they granted the dominant role in the story. Instead, the article took the side of the anti-corruption authorities, as the title of the piece demonstrates. The core facts of corruption in the article were eventually told through the mouth of the anti-corruption authorities. The local citizens played only a minor role in the final article. They were even described as the main beneficiaries of the success of the anti-corruption authorities' actions, and served merely as a background for that success. The same *Southern Weekend* editor says:

¹³ This quotation is translated from the Chinese, as are all the subsequent quotations from newspapers and interviewees.

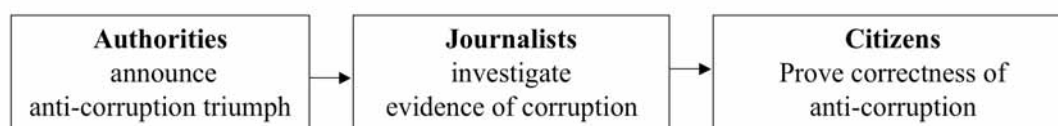
We added an extra sentence in front of the main title. It reads 'the whole citizenry of Chenzhou celebrated the fall of corrupt officials.' In doing so, we wanted to show that the anti-corruption action of the party's Hunan committee and the central government was well received by the ordinary mass. They embraced the government's anti-corruption success.

As editor X said, the report which appeared in the newspaper put the ordinary citizens in a subordinate position, giving them the aspect only of grateful subjects. An example: the first few lines of the article included these sentences:

Yesterday evening, the entire city of Chenzhou was involved in wild celebrations... Some people wanted to have 'all-night fireworks displays'. Among the banners carried by the crowd, one of them said: 'Thank the Party Central Committee for saving the people from calamity!' (Southern Weekend, 21/09/2006)

The way a story is represented in the newspaper does not necessarily coincide with the way in which the story was investigated. Sometimes the reporting can be totally changed, with dramatic effect, as in the example above. Nevertheless, a more generalised characteristic can be found with respect to the weight of the powerless citizens and the powerful authorities in media representation. A typical media investigation of official corruption could be framed in this way: the authorities say officially that they have just won a victory over corruption; then journalists set off to find out the details of the corruption; and then the authorities' anti-corruption project is proven both correct and glorious, especially in the eyes of ordinary citizens.

Figure 12: Corruption reporting model



Why are the media so keen to show the greatness of the authorities, not hesitating to distort the facts in order to achieve this goal? According to the interviewees, the reason for this is a matter not of journalistic technique but of political consideration. There are two kinds of explanation. First, the journalists themselves and their organisations see there is a need to please the political powers in exchange for political and economic capital. According to one reporter, speaking from the point of view of the newspaper:

I am not saying the ordinary people are not important. But the government is more powerful. Maybe you can understand it this way: by so doing our newspaper will gain some political capital. It is important for us to survive. You know the political atmosphere is always tight.

The words of a *Beijing News* reporter are from an individual journalist's viewpoint:

To be a successful journalist, you have to have the support of the government and officials. Your journalism will be more powerful with their help.

Second, governments may use their political power to force the media to publish in a way favourable to them. This is particularly the case for the media at local level, who face more complicated political pressures, that is, *Chenzhou Weekend* and *Xiaoxiang Morning* in this study. *Xiaoxiang Morning* reporter Y said:

The government suppresses the media constantly. At first, they tell you not to report negativity. If you don't listen, they will force you to publish propaganda. Can you say no? You can – but only if you want your newspaper to be closed down. That's why our newspaper has run a whole-page pure propaganda piece about Chenzhou office officials during the corruption. Shameful? Maybe! But the whole media environment is like this.

Although the out-of-town and national media had more autonomy in reporting Chenzhou corruption, as I have shown above, the pressure from the political organisations at their equivalent level of the state and the party is inevitable. Given the fact that the political organisations and politicians at different levels in different cities and provinces in China are connected, it is not surprising to see the national media frequently receiving orders from the state officials concerning a local case as to what kind of narrative should be used or even what should be reported or not. The *Beijing News* reporter Z said:

During the media exposure of the corruption, the Chenzhou government developed a PR function. They assembled a PR regiment to go to Beijing. It was led by the head of the Chenzhou propaganda office. They arrived in Beijing on 13 May 2004. They did not communicate directly with the Beijing media, but through their connections in the state council. The day after their arrival, CCTV stopped one of its programmes about Chenzhou corruption. How effective!

To sum up, whether done consciously or unconsciously, the media still act as an instrument of the government and an agent of party publicity. Even the so-called 'most independent' ones, i.e. the *Beijing News*, the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* and the *Southern Weekend*, are keen to favour the government and the party whenever possible. Politics is much stronger than either journalistic or economic forces in influencing the agenda and narrative of corruption reporting.

5. Conclusion

This study began by asking whether or not investigative journalism in China takes the same adversarial position in relation to officialdom as its Western counterparts, and, if it does not, what the relationship does look like. In seeking answers, I have examined the shifting media–politics dynamic in China both before and after the media reform, and proposed a possible analytical framework. In particular, I have explored how a massive official corruption case was reported, as an illustrative case study. Through the lens of media clientelism, I have shown that in China those holding political power in the ruling party also retain the power to control the media: that is, they define the role of the media and decide the degree of media autonomy. They determine which aspects of the public domain are to be concealed, and which to be uncovered, and for the latter they set the tone and narrative and guide the direction of media reports. They are the unquestionable ‘big boss’.

Media marketisation has to some extent undermined the power of politics but is far from having fundamentally disrupted it. China’s thirty-year media reform merely offered a new bottle (marketisation) for the old wine (political control). Politics still takes the lead in the media–politics relationship. One major difference from the old master–servant model is that the political parties now not only shout orders but also give treats. Controlling political and economic resources and delivering them to the media in exchange for support and loyalty, forces media and politics into a clientelistic relationship. In turn, the media serve their political patrons with obsequious journalism and the subsequent favourable public influence to trade for the opportunity of surviving in the tight political atmosphere and the profitable marketplace.

Although much is expected of the new genre of investigative journalism in the way of re-balancing the media–politics relationship, it is important to remember that this kind of journalism in essence operates within the same political economy and media ideology as all other journalism. Such journalism may be ‘investigative’ in terms of the approach to the topic and the methods deployed but is not ‘investigative’ in terms of the message it carries and delivers. It is still to a large extent politically oriented journalism, and it has developed more for the purpose of making politics than developing public responsibility. As I have shown in the case study of the reporting of official corruption, investigative journalism in China does not act against politics, rather it plays a game in a clientelistic network with particular political pressures. It reinforces media–politics clientelism through transmitting the voice of the politically powerful and building a favourable image in exchange for political protection, economic profit and individual gains.

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Appendix I: Coding schedule

I: Basic Information

Title

Media

Date

Length

Stage

II: The use of sources

<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>

III: Theme

IV: Position

V: Excerpt

Appendix II: Coding manual

Part I: Basic information

Title Record the title of the news item

Media Record the media of the news item

BJN: The Beijing News SMD: Southern Metropolitan Daily

SW: Southern Weekend XXM: Xiaoxiang Morning CZW: Chenzhou Weekend

Date Record the date of the news item

Length Record the number of paragraphs in each item

Stage Record the reporting stage of each news item:

1. Before the authority's investigation (February 2004–March 2006)
2. During the authority's investigation (April–September 2006)
3. After the authority's investigation (October 2006–November 2008)

Part II: The usage of sources

Record the frequency of quotation of the following sources:

- A. Anti-corruption authorities
- B. Local corrupt officials
- C. Local non-corrupt officials
- D. Local citizens, social and economic organisations that are directly influenced by the corruption
- E. Other sources, including the media, lawyers, social organisations and other individuals who are not directly influenced by the corruption

Part III: Theme

Record the main theme of each news item

ICC: Individual corruption case PCO: Portrait of corrupt officials

ACA: Anti-corruption action ROC: Rebuilding officialdom credibility

Part IV: Position

Record the dominant position of each news item (for which side it speaks):

- A. Anti-corruption authorities
- B. Local corrupt officials
- C. Local non-corrupt officials
- D. Local citizens, social and economic organisations that are directly influenced by the corruption
- E. Other sources, including the media, lawyers, social organisations and other individuals who are not directly influenced by the corruption

Part V: Excerpt

Record the sentences that may indicate the agenda-building process of the media's reports for each news item under analysis.

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