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Media diversification in contemporary China:
Does the left-right categorisation apply?

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Introduction

One feels fortunate to be born into Chinese society at its current stage of development, and even more so to work as a journalist observing and recording the many facets of contemporary China. A thousand journalists may produce a thousand different narratives depicting their joys and pains working as a journalist in contemporary China. But there is at least one point of consensus: we never lack news.

This is closely related to the increasingly drastic changes in China in recent years. An expression has long been coined for this: “China speed.” Nothing is static, and the nation’s speed of change often goes beyond all imagination.

Superficially, the change takes place in the country’s appearance. Landing in Beijing Capital International Airport nowadays and looking out of the plane window could be upsetting. Foreigners may be disturbed to find buildings and lights appear blurred, whereas returning Chinese naturally re-immense themselves in the familiar smell of the choky air. Nevertheless, it would be a totally different story were you to land at the time of, say, a high-profile international meeting held in China. The sky could be a stunning azure for two consecutive weeks, due to China’s emission-cutting resolution and tough smog-curbing measures to bring blue skies back. There is online banter that we Chinese are just efficient at everything — if we want the sky to be blue, then it’s blue.

Along with visible changes are deeper and more interesting social changes. Social transformation is taking place extremely quickly in China within a very short time span, and one feels like history is unfolding before one's eyes. It is sometimes argued that the process of modernisation China walked through in the past three decades took 300 years in some Western countries. It is perhaps natural that such a highly condensed social transformation is filled with a wide spectrum of controversies, wrangles, tensions and also, humour.

Media: not exempt from social diversification

In such circumstances, one fundamental social shift is the inevitable and irreversible fragmentation of a society which was highly unified and at the same time an unprecedented diversification of social interests. As a mirror of society, the media industry is not an exception to this process of fragmentation and diversification.

My own journalistic experience allows me an excellent insight into the detailed changes in the media, especially in terms of the cleavage in editorial stances between different media outlets. Among media professionals, it is sometimes heard that Chinese media is characterised by sharply divided “camps” holding different visions of society, and the difference is prominent whenever a major controversial event takes place. This diversity is born of a variety of social, political and economic factors. The effects of such a cleavage could be frustrating at times, and radical moves took place in recent years: Newspaper burning incidents made people’s jaw drop, the massive scale of online assaults paralysed rational communication between media outlets, and labels like “traitors” or “government lackeys” are attached to different media outlets.

There is increasing public criticism that the Chinese media is polluted by an opportunistic atmosphere and that instead of sticking to facts, some journalists write with assumed stances. Some media outlets try to step back from picking any side publicly, or seek to walk

a “neutral” path to maximise possible readership. But it is doubtful to what extent this could work in contemporary China or whether such a “neutral” space exists at all.

Can left-right framework apply to the Chinese media?

While doing research, I came across an interesting assertion, which led me to think more deeply about editorial stances in the Chinese media. Stockmann Daniela (2012) claims that,

“As we have seen in Chapters 7 and 8, media labels in China are not associated with different parties aligning on a left-right ideological continuum as is the case in liberal democracies. Instead, people make sense of a complicated news media environment by dividing media sources into categories that differ with respect to their level of trustworthiness and their expertise on the government and the public.”¹

To me, this conclusion intuitively sounded problematic. Within China, it is not uncommon to hear discussions of a left-right split between different media camps, or at least about the different visions of social development that different camps express. This split can be seen in the daily conversations among media professionals and netizens’ posts online. Many simply put it as “leftist versus rightest media,” and complaints about media polarisation are not infrequent.

The concepts of “left” and “right” are volatile in contemporary China. In China’s current social context, “left” and “right” have very different meanings from in the West. Roughly, in public discussions about the Chinese “left” and “right” media, “left” means conservative and pro-government, whereas “right” means more liberal and independent from government. A more detailed comparison of the definitions of “left” and “right” in current China is given in Table 1 in Chapter 1.

These “left” and “right” labels as applied to Chinese media outlets are not necessarily correct, and it is doubtful whether the differences between different media camps are drastic enough to be regarded as spanning a left-right continuum. However, we equally cannot simply dismiss such popular labels as spurious. The goal of this research paper is to use specific case studies to test the applicability of the left-right framework in the context of Chinese media.

The basic conclusion of this research paper is that the left-right categorisation fails to capture the complexity of the different approaches used by the Chinese media. These approaches cut across such simplistic categories. This is true at least judging from the viewpoints newspapers present in their paper editions, which are considered the most authoritative expression of their editorial stances.

Despite the conclusion that the left-right model is insufficient to grasp to the complex reality of Chinese media, this investigation into its applicability is nevertheless worthwhile, offering interesting new insights about the diversification of Chinese media. For example, current literature on China’s media tends to focus more on the differences between official and marketised media outlets. However, even among the marketised media outlets, the

¹ Stockmann, Daniela, 2012, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* electronic resource, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.206

prominent diversification of social, political and economic values they wish to represent is an intriguing phenomenon to explore.

It is uncertain how the intensive competition between different media outlets through delivering different values and adopting different approaches will play out in the coming decade, and what this will mean for society. Interviewees' predictions on this point are given in Chapter 3. One can argue that prediction is rarely accurate, but time is on our side, and history is always the ultimate judge.

Research method

This research paper focuses on print media. Currently in China, compared with new media, newspapers and magazines still serve as a major source of quality news content. And compared with television, editorials and reports from print media deliver editorial values and stances more overtly and more frequently. This research takes a close look at two representative newspapers: The Global Times (a subsidiary of the People's Daily, based in Beijing) and Southern Weekly (part of the Nanfang Media Group, based in Guangzhou).

On the Chinese Internet, these two newspapers are often labeled as the two most vocal representatives of China's "leftist" and "rightist" media. These simplistic labels indicate social feelings about different editorial stances of the two newspapers.

In Chapter 1, the two newspapers' background, ideals and slogans, as well as editor-in-chiefs' interviews in which they talk about their newspaper's stances will be brought together for analysis. They will be checked against the framework of "left versus right" debates in Chinese academia, so as to provide a basic understanding of the spectrum of editorial stances held by different Chinese media outlets.

In Chapter 2, specific news events are selected, and these two newspapers' editorials and reports on them will be compared. Cases selected include the Wenzhou bullet train crash in 2011 and the environmental protests in recent years. They triggered nationwide debates, and mirrored sharp conflicts during the speedy development of China. The last part of Chapter 2 is a comparative study of 2010-2015 New Year editorials of the two newspapers. In these editorials, both newspapers highlight what they perceive as the greatest challenges facing contemporary China, the priorities for China's reforms and the prospects of this country. The number of mentions of keywords, such as "nation," "individual," "China," and "world," will also be compared.

Chapter 3 includes in-depth phone interviews with eight Chinese journalists from marketised print media. Each interview lasted around 90 minutes. These journalists' understandings of China's media environment and their prospects in the next decade are presented.

Chapter 4 summarises the major conclusions of this research project.

Chapter 1 Media outlets upholding different banners

If you grab a Chinese journalist or a Chinese reader who regularly follows domestic news, and ask questions about China's leftist and rightist media, you can be sure the conversation could last for a while. What do they think "left" and "right" mean in China's current social context? And what does the gap between different media outlets indicate? These are part of a bigger issue to observe: the ties between Chinese media and Chinese politics.

Among media researchers both at home and abroad, the relationship between media and politics in contemporary China has been a focus of study since the 1990s (Hao Jianguo 2013). However, studies of the diversified editorial values and stances held by Chinese media outlets since China's reform and opening-up remain insufficient. This is evidenced in Hao's literature review covering the past six decades.

With that said, some case studies provided by researchers that directly touch upon this topic are inspiring. Some researchers do notice the variation in reports by different Chinese media outlets, which itself was part of social debate on certain controversial topics. For instance, the Chinese media's narratives of domestic healthcare reform are examined (Jane Duckett & Ana Inés Langer 2013), and it is argued that two different values, populism versus neoliberalism, have been adopted by representative media outlets in their reporting about healthcare reform. There are also comparative studies over contrasting reports among Chinese media outlets over issues like housing (Zhang Mei 2014) and the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake (Ye Aiping 2010).

Although media professionals are reluctant to accept simplistic labels such as "left" or "right," these labels are the most direct way for people to depict the editorial inclinations of a media outlet in contemporary China. In this chapter, the basic left-right framework in the current Chinese context will be explained. The historical backgrounds and editorial stances of two representative newspapers, The Global Times and Southern Weekly, will be examined in order to provide a basic understanding of the appropriateness of the left-right categorisation.

A common starting point: entertainment tabloid

In contemporary Chinese media studies, media reform since the 1980s has received huge attention. The central decision to reform the government-sponsored media system and the approval to introduce market mechanisms have given rise to the prosperity of marketised media across China.

Since then, a dichotomous division — state media versus marketised media — is frequently adopted by researchers looking into Chinese media. Further categorisation of Chinese marketised media outlets is possible based on their specific profit-making model and level of credibility among readers (Stockmann Daniela 2012). Generally however, the dichotomous state versus marketised framework is the most commonly used.

According to this categorisation, both The Global Times and Southern Weekly fall into the "marketised media" type. The former was born in Beijing, the capital city and political

centre of China, whereas the latter was started in Guangzhou, the forefront of the nation's reform and opening-up since the late 1970s.

The Global Times, launched in 1993 in Beijing, is a subsidiary under People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC). With a widespread network of overseas correspondents in over 150 countries and regions, The Global Times is marked by the coverage of international news. In recent years, its vocal editorials over controversial, significant issues both at home and abroad have earned it increasing attention. The Global Times has a daily circulation of over 2 million copies.² It carries advertisements every day, while sales remain a robust source of revenue. The Global Times media group continues to grow in recent years. Besides its Chinese edition newspaper, the whole organisation has several other sections including its English edition newspaper, a news portal website and a public polling centre.

Southern Weekly, launched in 1984 in Guangzhou, is affiliated to Nanfang Daily, the official newspaper of the Guangzhou Provincial Committee of the CPC. Southern Weekly is published every Thursday, and has a circulation of over 1.7 million copies.³ Besides this weekly newspaper, which is at the core of the Southern Weekly media group, the group also has two magazines, one new media company, and one publishing company in charge of the publishing business for the Southern Weekly media group.

The two newspapers shared one important similarity in their earliest stage of development: Both were "tabloid" newspapers that focused on entertaining content. He Chongyuan, founding editor-in-chief of The Global Times and currently vice president of People's Daily, once talked about the strong sense of being lost when the newspaper was launched. It was a strong sense of confusion: "No one knew what this new newspaper should look like, and no one knew who should be its target readership."⁴

Like many other marketised newspapers that started to emerge in the market back then, The Global Times also tried to become a "metro" newspaper. On the front page of the first issue published on January 3, 1993, more than half the page was occupied by a photo of Gong Li, a popular female movie star.

The same approach was adopted by Southern Weekly when it was launched. In the 1980s, China witnessed a fever of new weekly newspapers providing primarily entertainment content. Southern Weekly was officially launched on February 11, 1984, and it was a typical tabloid featuring a hotchpotch of digests and gossip news.

However, during their later drives for market success, the two newspapers turned to contrasting approaches. The Global Times is characterised by its coverage of international news, whereas Southern Weekly built its brand on domestic investigative reporting. The former discusses challenges facing China on the international stage, whereas the latter looks into domestic difficulties facing the nation. It is only since 2009, when The Global Times started to publish editorials around domestic issues, that the two began to have increasingly overlapping coverage.

² Source of Global Times circulation number: Global Times website.

<http://hd.globaltimes.cn/html/abouthq/>

³ Source of Southern Weekly circulation number: Southern Weekly website.

<http://www.infzm.com/aboutus.shtml>

⁴ Phoenix Weekly, 《环球时报》是怎样炼成的, 2013(27).

http://news.ifeng.com/shendu/fhzk/detail_2013_09/27/29945076_0.shtml

Beijing and Guangzhou, as two centres where most vigorous media outlets gather, also stamp the two newspapers with distinguishing city zeitgeists. One comment on Beijing's newspaper market is representative: "Beijing, with its unique geographic, political and cultural advantages, has been winning the upper hand in the contest for media resources. All kinds of newspapers would die to have a foothold here. It is no exaggeration that the most serious newspaper, the most vulgar newspaper, the avant-garde newspaper, and the most fashionable newspaper, all of them can settle down in this city."⁵

Xiang Xi, former editor-in-chief of Southern Weekly, held that Guangzhou's century-old news tradition played a key role in shaping Guangzhou's special media environment.⁶ Due to its unique geographic location in China's coastal regions, since very early on the CPC paid special attention when launching newspapers in this city.

In 1941, the CPC started Huashang Daily in Hong Kong, which was the predecessor of Nanfang Daily in Guangzhou. Zhou Enlai, a senior communist statesman who later served as premier of the People's Republic of China after 1949, stressed that Huashang Daily should be well integrated into local environment and should not "become too red." In 1950, when Nanfang Daily was just launched, a branch was set up in Hong Kong to facilitate publishing and advertisement business.⁷ In other words, the commodity nature of media in Guangzhou was emphasised since the very early years of the CPC — decades before China's reform and opening-up in the 1970s.

The Global Times and Southern Weekly, both born with prominent political genes and commercial goals, were both trying to find a way to win market recognition and gain market influence.

A survival game in the market

There is a rich literature among Western scholars on the Chinese marketised media's role in changing state-society relations. Different scholars come to different conclusions, but one question interests them all: can market-oriented media contribute to political liberalisation and democratisation?

Media researchers largely hold two sets of assumptions. One is that the Chinese media's market reform, as it proceeds, will grow beyond its original design and may bring unexpected change to the nation's political system. The second is that it has been a "purposed" reform since the beginning, in which the reformers' political will matters more. In other words, it is the reformers' ambition that decides how far media should go and when they should put a halt to change in media.

Nevertheless, reality is much more complex, which has been proven by the experiences of both The Global Times and Southern Weekly. The whole process of reform is an experiment pushed by the market, the government, and the editors.

⁵ Zhou Wei, 媒体前沿报告, Beijing: Guang Ming Daily Press, Beijing, 2002(03)

⁶ Zhou Zhiyi, Huang Yiqiu & Peng Bo, 理想照耀现实:《南方周末》二十五年成长史, Media magazine, 2009(08), [CLC code] G239.29

⁷ Zhou Zhiyi, Huang Yiqiu & Peng Bo, 理想照耀现实:《南方周末》二十五年成长史, Media magazine, 2009(08), [CLC code] G239.29

While it is too early to tell what this experiment could bring in the long run, the role of the editors themselves should not be underestimated. In previous literature, Chinese media reform has often been mystified as state-market rivalry. In fact, the process is much more transparent than many assume. It is not a mysterious game, but a process of accumulating solid market experiences, and this process is filled with contingencies. The commercial model and editorial inclination that a newspaper adopts nowadays often stems from a random market success explored by its early editors.

In this survival game where newspapers compete to provide better food for market appetite, the personal ambition and social ideals of a marketised newspaper's starters and the editor-in-chiefs throughout its history leave a strong stamp on newspaper content. In the process of media experiment, they are key figures in shaping and delivering their newspaper's editorial stance and values.

What “banner” do you uphold?

According to a 2013 article in Hong Kong magazine Phoenix Weekly, “Within the Global Times [before the year of 2006, according to context of the article], there were discussions about what kind of line this newspaper should walk and how the Global Times should position itself in the market. An agreement was achieved: the Nanfang Media Group has become a banner-bearer in the market, and there was no way the Global Times could walk the same line. According to Hu, in terms of market competition strategy, The Global Times should be different from the Nanfang Media Group and uphold another banner.”⁸

What are the “banners” the two newspapers try to hold? In the eyes of the general public, The Global Times upholds the banner of “nationalism,” whereas Southern Weekly upholds the banner of “liberalism.” In the perspectives of the two newspapers' leaderships, it is interesting that the first editors of both newspapers mentioned “patriotism.” Both believed they could speak out for China's mainstream public and that they have the responsibility to find a way out for a nation witnessing its own transformation and walking out of moving beyond its past pains.

A comparison of two sets of sources provides a further understanding of what “banners” the two newspapers' leaderships think they uphold. In his interviews with other media outlets including Southern People Weekly and Phoenix Weekly, Global Times Editor-in-Chief Hu Xijin has explained more about the newspaper's values and editorial stance. In terms of Southern Weekly, since 1997 a New Year editorial was published every year, in which their visions of China path were stressed.

These sources have been analysed within the new left-liberalism framework (Fang Kecheng & Gong Fangzhou 2012), to test whether these editorial stances indeed fall into this left-right spectrum. Table 1 is the simplified version of Fang and Gong's visualised conclusions of left-right differences in current China.⁹ Since the 1990s, Chinese academia has witnessed very open, fierce debates between two schools of intellectual thought — “new left” versus “liberalism.” In recent years, these two labels have been widely attached to the

⁸ Phoenix Weekly, 《环球时报》是怎样炼成的, 2013(27).

http://news.ifeng.com/shendu/fhzk/detail_2013_09/27/29945076_0.shtml

⁹ Fang Kecheng & Gong Fangzhou, 读图识政治：中国的左派与右派, CNPolitics, February 2012. <http://cnpolitics.org/2012/02/left-right/>

two newspapers, The Global Times and Southern Weekly. The general methodology of this research is to use this academic framework to check how much it applies to media.

Findings of the comparison show that the two newspapers do stress different things as their editorial goals, but they do not necessarily fall into the left-right spectrum. If an editorial leadership's vision can be seen as "top-level planning" for a newspaper, the two newspapers actually share more similarities than one would expect.

Judging from the interview articles and New Year editorials, the editorial leadership at both newspapers clearly points out the complexity of China's development — the enormous achievements, known as "China's rise," as well as great challenges in further reforms. Both stress presenting "truth" to the public in the bitter reality, which requires honesty, courage and wisdom of media.

In terms of vision for China's future, both believe in a democratic society and more freedoms for individuals. Both agree this process could only be accomplished through China's own exploration, and that further reforms must proceed. But in this process, different facets are emphasised.

The Global Times leadership points out that (1) a high level of social cohesion must be maintained in gradual reforms, and powerful central authorities are indispensable; (2) China is part of globalisation and has been learning from developed countries, but Western experiences cannot be simply transplanted in China; (3) Universal values like democracy and human rights undoubtedly benefit all people, but these concepts have been highly politicised and simplified in the current international geometry, and are often used as political tools to exert pressure on China.

In Southern Weekly New Year editorials, views repeatedly stressed include (1) individuals' rights deserve more attention, compared with rising national strength; (2) Authority of the constitution must be insisted upon; (3) Universal values should be firmly supported.

These views, carried in interviews and editorials, do not necessarily cancel each other out. However, they do indicate different things highlighted by the leaderships of the two newspapers.

Table 1

	Left	Right
Core views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China model, nationalism, equality • state interests prioritised above individual interests • to implement universal participation in politics among citizens, to fully legitimise public authority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • liberalism, universal values, freedom • individual rights prioritised above state power • to build a limited government that safeguards individual freedom, to restrict government power through constitutional system and rule of law
Views on democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participatory democracy • to guarantee universal democracy through strong government intervention and on the basis of property equality and equality among social classes • parliamentary democracy is fake, and government would be controlled by a few elites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • representative democracy • to realise democracy and prevent mob tyranny through procedural justice • direct democracy is costly and risky, and its disaster has been proven in history
Views on Maoist era	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • there were rational and positive elements • we should discover institutional innovation in Maoist era • we should learn from great democracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • we should bid farewell to Maoist era, which was featured by confiscation of private property, occupation of public wealth and political pressure on different opinions
Views on globalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • nationalism • caution against Western hegemony, including cultural hegemony • criticise “traitors” • criticise globalisation, through which China has been dragged into unjust world capitalist system • caution against foreign capitalism, especially capital invasion by multinational corporations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • oppose nationalism • we should learn from developed countries, including developed elements from Western culture • radical nationalists are “patriotic thieves” • endorse globalisation, and China must further open up to external world • it is China’s internal outdated systems and ideology, not external capitalism that hinders China’s development
Views on corruption & inequality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • government regulation prioritised above market’s role, because complete liberalisation of capital inevitably exacerbates wealth gap and inequality • in order to combat corruption, public property ownership should be maintained, state power be strengthened, and redistribution of wealth be conducted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • oppose government intervention, it is flawed market reforms that benefit those in power and widen wealth gap • in order to combat corruption, reforms must be insisted, market economy be developed, and state power be restricted

One explanation is their different self-positioning in the market. The Global Times, a newspaper branded for its international news reporting, tends to discuss China as a whole in the international community. Therefore the image of the overall nation, as well as its national interest rivalry with other countries in globalisation, is stressed more. Southern Weekly, well-known for its investigative reports in domestic issues, pays more attention to stories of individuals, especially the disadvantaged groups, and thus concepts like “civil society” and “individual rights” are stressed in almost all of its New Year editorials, and it appeals to universal values to push forward China’s domestic reforms. This variation will be further examined in studies in Chapter 2. It is in this sense that the two newspapers do carry some characteristics on the left-right spectrum. But generally it would be too simplified to force the two into the left-right categorisation.

Dividing public opinion or shaping it?

Diversified values held by different media outlets are often seen as a signal of social progress. However, this progress is also accompanied by painful challenges. Both The Global Times and Southern Weekly, labeled “left” and “right,” have been attacked for speaking for only certain interests. And worries are mounting over risks brought by “overly divided” public opinion.

There is also criticism that some media professionals hold presumed stances before any reporting, and that they simply squeeze news materials into a stereotyped model based on their own social and political values. Liu Peng and Jiang Hailun (2013) discuss the media’s role in causing rifts in public opinion, and criticise the media’s simplified reports that cater to populism on the Internet: “In China’s current social transformation, should the media promote social communication, bridge social divides, rebuild social trust and shape social identification, or should it further consolidate the chaos of public opinion, help destroy social trust, and expand disorder in social morality? This is a serious topic that deserves the contemplation of every media professional.”¹⁰

It would be ideal for any marketised media outlet to avoid picking a side and walk a neutral line to serve as a bridge and to maximise its readership. Yet it is doubtful whether seeking a neutral space would be a realistic approach in China’s current media market and media environment.

¹⁰ Liu Peng & Jiang Hailun, 是粘合还是撕裂社会？《南方周末》“唐慧案”报道引发的思考, *Journalism Review*, 2013(09), [CLC code] G212

Chapter 2 Where do you stand on controversial news events?

At China's current stage of social transformation, Chinese public opinion is unprecedentedly intensive, diversified and vigorous. The emergence of social media, combined with a mass volume of users, means that traditional news giants have to respond quickly and readjust their role in order to grasp audience. It is never boring to contrast reports and editorials from different Chinese media outlets as soon as big news breaks out.

This chapter aims to contrast articles from The Global Times (GT) and Southern Weekly (SW), to examine closely how they differentiate or converge when approaching topics and concepts that are of great concern to the Chinese public. Fundamentally, the cases all point to the following grand questions for the society in transformation: What are the priorities for Chinese reform? What should China's future path look like? Where should China position itself in the world?

Pool of samples

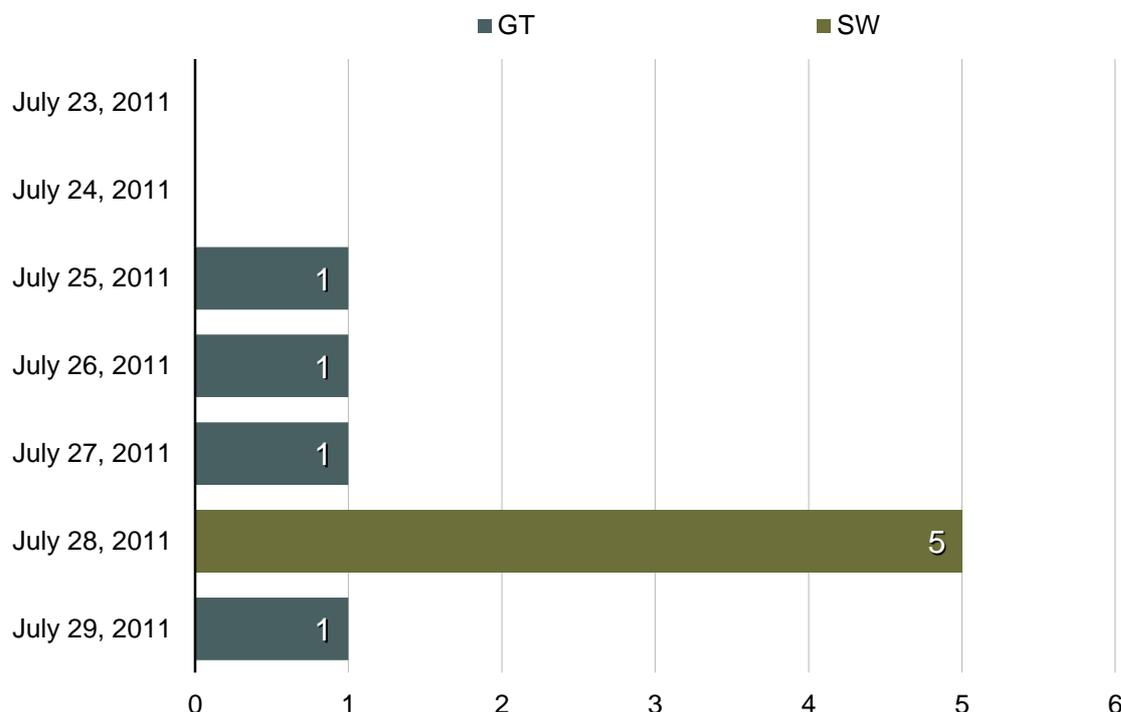
Topics	Core themes of discussion	Number of samples (43)	
		GT (21)	SW (22)
1. Wenzhou bullet train crash	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is China developing too fast? - Should safety be given a higher priority than economic development? - Should railway reform be dominated by the government or the market? 	5	6
2. Street protests to oust PX plants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Should the environment take priority over economic development? - Do environmental worries fundamentally shake social stability? - Can China achieve Western standards in its protection of the environment? 	10	10
3. China in yearly review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What should be the most urgent priority for reform in China? 	6	6

Table 2 lists the topics of the three case studies in this chapter and the key discussions involved. A total number of 43 samples were analysed. Due to technical reasons of unsound digital databases and incomplete archives on newspaper websites, the sampling process turned out to be very time-consuming. In terms of Cases No.1 and No.2, only related articles before the end of 2012 can be located by keyword searches, including both immediate reports after the incidents took place and articles in the follow-up periods. In order to check the consistency of their stances, a limited number of articles published in 2013 to 2015 have then been obtained through general search engines and the two newspapers' official websites for comparison.

The sampling process of Case No.3 was quick and problem-free, as all target articles were published regularly at a fixed time and can thus be tracked easily through general search engines.

Case No.1 Wenzhou Bullet Train Crash

Chart 1 Number of immediate reports/editorials on train crash



The 2011 Wenzhou bullet train accident was a watershed news incident for the Chinese media. For the very first time, the power of social media was manifested in a fatal accident that triggered nationwide debates.

The first seeking-for-help message was posted on Weibo, a homegrown Chinese equivalent of Twitter, by a passenger on the train. The entire search and rescue process was followed closely by the public on social media, which completely outpaced traditional media. National debates over the speed and quality of China's modernisation erupted on social media. Pressure toward reform of the railway system, systems for the accountability of officials, as well as government attitudes toward public queries, all mounted on social media. This pressure precipitated a series of follow-up incidents, including the resignation of Wang Yongping, then ministry of railways spokesperson. Wang's dismissive defence of official explanations for the burying of the front car of the train, "Whether you believe it or not, I believe it anyway," sparked public fury.

Dealing with a major accident that directly touched a series of significant issues concerning Chinese reform and facing unprecedented challenge from social media, traditional media outlets were facing a great test.

Table 3 Core arguments/topics in Wenzhou case			
Key messages in GT editorials		Key topics in SW reports and commentary	
GT editorial 1 高铁是中国必须经历的自我折磨	Accident should be a starting point for safer high-speed rail, not a halt to high-speed railway development.	SW report 1 “不可能”的事故	Technical causes for the crash, and speculations about “tacit rules” in high-speed train dispatching system
GT editorial 2 安全应是中国调整的主攻方向	China has to ensure both speedy and safe development, which safeguards the legitimacy of China’s development model.	SW report 2 不该发生的事，无法停止的痛	Overemphasis on “efficiency” amid national development; questions regarding death toll and railway authorities’ rash compensation
GT editorial 3 所有人都是舆论河流上的船	In an era of vigorous growth of “public opinion democracy,” nobody is able to “guide” public opinion. Railway authorities’ attitudes in terms of interacting with public are fundamentally wrong. Clumsy interaction in light of emergency will gradually exhaust China’s political resources.	SW report 3 中国高铁神话终结？	Uncertain future of China’s high-speed rail myth
GT editorial 4 中国的具体漏洞需一针一线补上	China can only gradually fix up its loopholes in specific cases. Government should change its way of dealing with emergency to improve credibility and boost transparency. Public should remain rational, rather than criticise for the sake of criticising.	SW report 4 官员问责：明规则与“潜规则”	Time for China to bid farewell to development by leaps and bounds
		SW commentary 1 告别畸形的“跨越式发展”	Rules and “tacit rules” in systems for the accountability of officials

Presented below is an analysis of the immediate responses of GT and SW. July 28 issue was SW’s first weekly issue after the train collision, in which four reports and one editorial by an SW commentator were published. GT, on the other hand, published four daily editorials by July 29. (See Chart 1)

Table 3 lists the specific headlines of the 9 sample articles and their key topics and arguments. In these articles, the two newspapers share similar stances in the following regards:

- The public has reasonable skepticism toward immature technology and management chaos in railway system.
- Investigation results should be published as soon as possible.
- Railway authorities must face up to the accident, and related officers must be held responsible.
- The development of China’s high-speed railway faces huge risks.
- Public governance severely lacks behind and doesn’t match speedy economic growth;

- Poor emergency response to public doubts harms government credibility and besieges government in crisis.
- Safety has already become the point of convergence of various sharp criticisms in current China.

On the basis of these agreements, the two newspapers hold vastly different views over China's development model, as listed in Table 4.¹¹

Table 4 Different stances in Wenzhou case		
Key questions in debates	GT	SW
Is China trapped in new "great leap forward" development?	No. Given the disaster in the 1950s, China keeps caution against overly ambitious growth and is still exploring the most appropriate development speed. Current rapid growth is driven by solid Chinese will of walking out of poverty and improving material life, which is shared by both the government and the public. It is meaningless to criticise "rapid growth" itself or simplify it as a result of policymaking.	Yes. Development by leaps and bounds means the target set already surpasses the existing capability of public governance. China experienced two "great leap forward" movements in the past century, both leading up to disasters. It's time to bid farewell to the obsession of developing by leaps and bounds.
Should safety be promoted on the basis of slowdown?	No. It is meaningless to say China's modernisation should be boosted or be slowed down. China will continue to face the challenge of being exposed to higher safety risks compared with Western societies. Safety should be transformed from an economic burden into a new factor for China's economic increment, new domestic demand and new wealth. Achieving Western safety standards while keeping vigorous Chinese economy would defend the legitimacy of Chinese development model.	Yes. High technology of speedy train should only be applied when social foundations like basic social institutions and public governance are ready; otherwise high technology could in turn become a barrier. In the best scenario, high technology couldn't play its role. In the worst scenario, high technology itself becomes the biggest risk.
How to approach railway system reform?	It is not self-justified to occupy a moral high ground and completely negate the role of railway ministry in Chinese economy and Chinese society. The reform in the railway system has been slow, but technical difficulties in separating political interference from this special industry are overwhelming. Instead of bashing the whole system, problem-solving efforts should focus on technological and management levels. The historical era in which one grand reform led up to colossal liberation of productivity has gone.	China must face up to slacking public governance and face up to deficiencies in Chinese economy like monopoly and political interference in enterprises, which is the only way to secure liberalisation of productivity.

¹¹ In Table 4, the GT stance on railway reform was explained in its editorial, 全盘否定铁道部并非舆论正义, published on August 3, 2011. The editorial wasn't listed in Table 3 simply because its timing of publication doesn't fit the sampling criteria; it was published after the first stage following the bullet train crash. But the argument is quoted here to provide a better understanding of the GT stance.

After the landmark Wenzhou bullet train incident in 2011, both media outlets looked further into the issue in later years, and their stances have been consistent with their first-stage response. On July 23, 2014, the third anniversary of the train crash, GT published an editorial, in which it reviews the eruption of populist emotions on social media in 2011, and argues that such emotions forcefully sever state interests from long-term public interest. The editorial also reviews the radical attacks against high-speed railway development immediately following the 2011 accident. “Chinese society lacks confidence, especially in terms of high technology. Since the reform and opening-up, we’ve been learning from and imitating the West. China has almost zero experience in outshining the West in a specific high technology field. When even the US hadn’t got a high speed railway, China already comprehensively unfolded its speedy railway construction. This single fact already set the foundations for self-negation,” the editorial says.¹²

SW, on the other hand, continues its observation into railway system reform. For instance, on October 17, 2014, it published a report on the new railway authorities being trapped in the plight of balancing economic benefits and public interests. A pro-market stance pervades the report. According to the lead of the report, the newly founded China Railway corporation inherited huge loans from the former railway ministry, and it couldn’t find a more marketised way of investment and financing. As a result, its burden has become increasingly heavy in light of expanding railway investment plans. In the last paragraph, Rong Chaohe, professor of transportation economics from Beijing Jiaotong University, is quoted, “Railway has its own rules of operation, investing and financing. Railway development should be transformed from the abnormal ‘development by leaps and bounds’ into normal, rational development. [...] The visible hand that deviates too far from the market is bound to be punished.”¹³

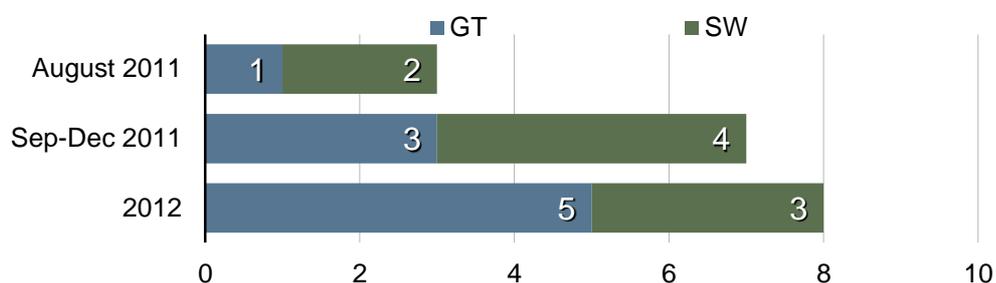
It is clear that over the Wenzhou incident, the two newspapers hold drastically different points of view even while sharing many points of agreement. But among the prominent differences, there is only one that carries a left-right characteristic — one newspaper stresses the existence of government guidance in railway reform, whereas the other highlights the importance of market rules and the importance of letting go the invisible hand. As one media insider points out, even this doesn’t really mean left-right differentiation — nowadays in China the interests of government and market mingle, rather than conflict with each other.

¹² The Global Times, 回看 7.23, 当时舆论幼稚而偏激, July 23, 2014

¹³ Southern Weekly, 经济效率 VS 公共利益, 中国“铁总”为钱所困, October 17, 2014

Case No.2 Nationwide environmental protests

Chart 2 Number of immediate and later reports/editorials on environmental protests



Local protests against chemical plants that stirred up residents' worries about environmental pollution have erupted across China in recent years. The widespread "Not-in-My-Back-Yard (NIMBY)" movements, taking place in the current context of tension between local governments and public, pose huge challenges to governance at the local level.

Paraxylene (PX), a chemical essential in manufacturing polyester clothing and plastic bottles, has become a "toxic brand" in China at present. In 2007, citizens in Xiamen successfully forced the relocation of a PX plant through an anti-PX parade. In later years, street demonstrations were adopted by residents in several other places, including Dalian, Shifang, Qidong, Ningbo, Kunming and Maoming, to oust chemical projects from their neighbourhood.

Table 5 Mass environmental protests across China, 2011-14

August 2011	Dalian, Northeast China's Liaoning Province	against PX plant
July 2012	Shifang, Southwest China's Sichuan Province	against molybdenum copper plant
July 2012	Qidong, East China's Jiangsu Province	against waste water pipeline
October 2012	Ningbo, East China's Zhejiang Province	against PX plant
May 2013	Kunming, Southwest China's Yunnan Province	against PX plant
April 2014	Maoming, South China's Guangdong Province	against PX plant
May 2014	Hangzhou, East China's Zhejiang Province	against waste incineration plant

Samples for analysis here include articles published immediately after the August 14, 2011 Dalian anti-PX protest (one editorial from GT on August 16 versus one commentary and one report from SW on August 18), as well as articles published in late 2011 and 2012 more broadly on China's environmental protests. After the 2011 Dalian incident and along with the domino effect of environmental projects throughout China, both newspapers tend to discuss environmental protests altogether as a challenge facing China, rather than only focusing on a single case each time. Some reports published in 2013, 2014 and 2015 are looked at here to check the consistency of their stances.

Table 6 key topics and themes in environment protests case				
Immediate reports/editorials	GT editorial 1 环保应成“最高”但非“唯一”追求	Environment should be a top goal, but not the only goal. China has to pragmatically find best balance between social development and environmental safety.	SW commentary 1 大连PX：糊涂地来，糊涂地去？	PX project suspension after street politics can hardly be called “victory.” It’s not a long-term solution. Neither the arrival nor disappearance of the Dalian PX project was conducted in an institutionalised way. A big portion of public opposition was based on rumours and groundless imagination. The root of this lies in lack of information transparency, breaches of supervision procedures, and local government’s hostility toward media. What’s most important is to build truly transparent decision-making mechanisms under public supervision.
			SW report 1 “大大连”迷失	Dalian has been suffering from scandals in the heavy chemical industry in the past year. Interests of state, local government and enterprises are highly united, while environment risks are huge. Debates about “should industry serve city or should city serve industry” have been fierce among local scholars and officials. Dalian has lost itself in a grand blueprint. Local nostalgia is apparent among ordinary locals, who don’t feel benefits from expanding GDP.
Later reports/editorials	GT editorial 2 有特色的道路不可能是免费的	Chinese social attention is massively shifting from external challenges to domestic problems, which is a progress. The fact that China embarks on a unique path inevitably means risks. China has been waving between conceit and self-contempt. It’s been hard to identify itself accurately. But after all, China is not fragile. History has proven China’s resilience in dealing with problems.	SW report 2 环评法应增加政策环评	An interview with Mou Guangfeng, an official with the Ministry of Environmental Protection and a major initiator of Environmental Impact Assessment Law, over criticisms and short-comings of the law.

Table 6 key topics and themes in environment protests case				
	<p>GT editorial 3</p> <p>民主，仅靠革命远远不够</p>	<p>Recent social changes, such as PX factory shutdown due to local protests and Internet outcry for monitoring air quality indices are related to democracy-building. There is wide consensus in China that democracy is the big trend, and that democracy doesn't just mean Western democracy. China cannot copy the model of "political shock" in democracy- building. The process of China's rise can also be a process of exploring a new model of democracy.</p>	<p>SW report 3</p> <p>七千工业园，藏全国之污？环保部主管 NGO 怒揭全国工业园区“七宗罪”</p>	<p>All China Environment Federation, an NGO, investigated 18 industrial parks in 8 provinces in 2010. According to their report, seven problems are severe: prominent environmental risks; formalistic environment impact assessment (EIA); pollution control facilities existing in name only; sharp conflicts caused by environment worries; pollution transfer; poor environmental law enforcement; and waste of land resources.</p>
	<p>GT editorial 4</p> <p>中国没在“保险箱”里，欧美也一样</p>	<p>“Uncertainty” was the key word of 2011 world politics. No country - be it China, US, or Europe - stays in a safe box. China is building resilience and accumulating experiences through solving problems like PX crisis and Wukan unrest. Global competition pattern heavily influences a country's domestic development. But sense of crisis and pessimism should be differentiated. It deserves pondering that China shouldn't be knocked down by pessimistic defeatism.</p>	<p>SW report 4</p> <p>PX 安检</p>	<p>Three months after the Dalian PX incident, investigation results were still unknown. Insiders revealed that the project wasn't halted for a single day. Huge profits for enterprises and great GDP prospects dwarf costs of law breaches. Petrochemical enterprises are moving increasingly closer to residential blocs in China. Dalian government could not afford the costs of relocating the existing PX factory.</p>
	<p>GT editorial 5</p> <p>希望什那吃的这一蟹是最后一蟹</p>	<p>China, as a late comer on the global arena, will remain at the low-end of global production chain for a long period. Mining and chemical projects will not go away overnight. Local governments have to carefully deal with projects that may cause environmental concerns and abandon the fantasy of “controlling public opinion.” It is wrong location, disqualified environmental protection measures and unsuccessful government-public communication that confront these projects with public interests.</p>	<p>SW report 5</p> <p>谁制造了PX 全民敏感词？</p>	<p>“PX” has become a sensitive word throughout China. On potential toxicity and safe distance of proposed PX projects, many choose to distrust the government, and anti-PX people are seen as heroes. An NGO employee holds that local governments' formalistic EIA procedures and ways of blocking public criticism are hardly convincing. The practices in many other regions like Texas of the US and Taiwan are listed to contrast with the situation in the Chinese mainland.</p>

Table 6 key topics and themes in environment protests case			
	<p>GT editorial 6</p> <p>什邡事件应当依法善后</p>	<p>Shifang protest was complicated and politicised in the current national context of sharp social conflicts. Credible investigation results into riots should be provided as soon as possible, and judicial treatment of detainees should be convincing. Whether the aftermath of the incident can be addressed in a fair way and be addressed according to law has a landmark meaning.</p>	<p>SW report 6</p> <p>改革“明星”再聚首</p> <p>A report on a special gathering of some former and incumbent local officials who once boosted prominent reforms. Discussions touch upon mass incidents in Shifang and Qidong. Questions are raised during the gathering: Why projects aimed to benefit both state and the public are denied by people? Why does the public choose radical means to express appeals? Practical problems, including transparency of decision-making and ways of public participation, are also discussed during the gathering.</p>
	<p>GT editorial 7</p> <p>启东、什邡的剧情不应再重演</p>	<p>The vicious circle of “problematic policymaking->violent protests->policies revoked” may prove disastrous to social stability. People may refuse to trust local authorities and turn to radical means to realise interest appeals. Public participation must be guaranteed in decision-making process. Experiences in dealing with mass incidents are lacked throughout the nation. In China, institutionalisation can only take shape in the process of constant frictions, which will ultimately promote the improvement of rule of law.</p>	<p>SW report 7</p> <p>求解环境群体性事件：“开窗”</p> <p>The article includes interviews with officials, think tanks and other experts. It discusses possible solutions to break the vicious circle of environmental mass incidents. Consensus and suggestions are listed, which will be further discussed in Table 7.</p>
	<p>GT editorial 8</p> <p>用综合改革突破重化工立项困境</p>	<p>It’s increasingly difficult for the government to dominate the approval and construction of heavy chemical industrial projects. Comprehensive reform of procedures is needed, so that those procedures’ legitimacy can be recognised. In the long term, market will serve as the leverage between public fears and public interests, and such projects will concentrate in certain specific zones. But this will be a long process. Government and social elites should guide social rationality and accelerate interest adjusting and rebalancing in this process.</p>	<p>SW report 8</p> <p>启东事件后，江苏官员首谈环评工作得失：环评听证，要强制，更要审核</p> <p>An interview with Pan Liangbao, an official with Environmental Protection Department of Jiangsu Province and major drafter of a provincial document about ensuring public participation in environment protection. Topics of the interview include the Qidong incident, the system of social stability assessment, and specific difficulties in public participation.</p>
	<p>GT editorial 9</p> <p>重化工项目上街头裁决非长久之计</p>	<p>In China at present, the approval of heavy chemical industrial projects has fallen into a stalemate. Street politics is not a long-term solution. Four specific suggestions are proposed in this editorial, which are listed in Table 7.</p>	

In these articles, the two newspapers are in agreement in the following regards:

- The development of heavy chemical industrial projects in China has been stuck in a lose-lose situation and has fallen into a vicious circle: decisions rashly made->violent protests staged->decisions rashly revoked. "PX" becomes a sensitive word. There is a saying spreading among the public that "Riots are the solution to problems. The bigger the riots are, the more active the authorities will be in problem-solving."
- Local governments' way of dealing with public opinion and street demonstrations severely harms official credibility and exacerbates the already intensive official-public relations.
- Both transparency and institutionalisation of decision-making should be boosted, and public participation and monitoring must be guaranteed.
- Rule of law should be the fundamental principle in addressing these conflicts.

While acknowledging the above-mentioned problems, the two newspapers hold different views, as listed in Table 7.

Table 7 Different stances in environment protests case		
Key questions in debate	GT	SW
Environment vs development	Ordinary people benefit from development, and environment worries must become an opportunity to upgrade development. China has no choice but to explore its unique path of development.	Environment is sacrificed for the sake of GDP, and ordinary people don't feel the benefits from expanding GDP statistics. Nostalgia of previous city environments and previous urban management is reported.
Environment vs stability	Despite diversifying interests and erupting conflicts, general political stability remains and still has a solid foundation. Erupting conflicts could be a chance to consolidate China's democratic consultation system.	Compared with GDP, social stability becomes a more important index in officials' political performance evaluation. Social stability assessment mechanisms are being introduced for early risk control during approval of projects. But specific speculations and creative measures are urgently needed.
Western environment standards	Environmental safety should be stressed, but China also has to live with the fact that it is not practical to forcibly transplant Western standard into China, and that China will remain at the lower end of global production chain for a period. Right now China has to live with the bitter gap between its own environment safety level and that in Europe and the US.	Learning from advanced experiences in developed countries and regions are stressed. Exxon Mobil baytown, the biggest petrochemical complex in the US, is cited as a good example.
Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Precaution should be taken against potential protesting waves spreading to existing heavy chemical industrial projects in operation; - New PX projects should be halted across the nation; - A set of open, transparent, effective procedures in terms of project evaluation and approval must be established; - So far, all environmental protests stem from local protestors' consideration of their own interests, none is "political protest," and it's important to make interest compensation mechanisms reasonable enough; - The development of heavy chemical industrial projects is up to market in the long run. But the in the short run, government and social elites have the responsibility to boost social rationality. 	<p>Suggestions from interviewees:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Innovation, wisdom and courage are needed in establishing and improving mechanisms of social stability risk assessment during important decision-making; - Emergency management measures in some local areas are no more than Version 2.0 of traditional stability maintenance model, and local officials must fundamentally change their mentality; - Precautionary principle should be introduced into environmental law legislation; - Information transparency and public participation can be boosted through specific measures; - The fundamental solution is to guarantee smooth judicial remedial channels and restrict government power.

This stalemate over petrochemical development has continued in recent years. In more recent reports and editorials, both newspapers reviewed the plight and discussed the horrible legacy of radical and rash solution of conflicts over controversial petrochemical projects.

According to a 2014 report by SW, “After the July 2012 mass incident, Shifang becomes a notorious example throughout the Party. No superior leader would like to visit Shifang, and local officials’ requests for exchange trips are denied by other cities.” Shifang, as many other similar cities in China, halts its controversial industrial protests due to protests and falls into low ebb of city development. Li Zhuo, head of local Party authorities, sees it as “a puzzle of the whole nation.”¹⁴

GT, in its editorials throughout 2013 to 2015, continues its stance and calls for a possible breakthrough. “For China, it is an urgent need to increase large-scale PX projects for the sake of both civil livelihood and national development. [...] For a big, populous country like China, failure of self-reliance in heavy industry is as horrible as failure in self-supply of food, which poses long-term strategic risks to the nation.”

On this basis, GT calls for both the public and government to abandon irrational mentality and put an end to the current vicious circle. “The 2007 protest in Xiamen ousted the city’s PX project, but set a bad example for the public to irrationally deny petrochemical projects in China. [...] In earlier cases, local authorities’ inadequate communication with public and inadequate credibility led to residents’ reaction against PX projects.” Meanwhile, the editorial criticises a dramatic “chorus” by government, the public and some public intellectuals. “Some government officials appeal to their political tactic of prioritising stability maintenance, local residents insist ‘NIMBY’ anyway, and some public intellectuals were using these incidents to promote themselves. Such interaction and such a chorus undermine the public interest and national interest time and again.”¹⁵

Media’s deep involvement in the swirl of PX debates and environment incidents has been noticed by Chinese academics. There is criticism that the Chinese media failed to detach themselves from the government-public confrontation. They fell into the swirl and took sides, creating an ever greater rift in public opinion (Zhang Taofu & Xiang Yiqian 2014).

Nonetheless, purely judging from the samples here, one can hardly see a black-or-white side-picking. Such mass incidents reflect a wrangle among complex interests. This wrangle is not simply government versus public, or local factory versus local residents. Even in terms of solutions, stressing merely government guidance or merely public participation is meaningless. In the case of environmental protests, superficially one may find some differences between the two newspapers that fit into the left-right framework, but fundamentally they share much more basic agreements than divergences.

¹⁴ Southern Weekly, 什邡后遗症，“这是整个国家的困惑”，October 30, 2014

¹⁵ The Global Times, PX 项目，溃退中呼唤坚守点的出现，April 1, 2014

Case No.3 China in yearly editorials

It is very interesting to read the Year-end/New Year editorials of the two newspapers. GT and SW, both focusing on political and social news, look back at what they perceive as the biggest challenges facing China in the past year and express their expectations for the nation in the upcoming year. For a research project looking at diversifying stances of different newspapers, these editorials are ideal material for comparison. The Global Times launched its section of editorials in 2009. And yearly editorials over the past six years (from 2010 to 2015) of both newspapers are listed in Table 8. Each piece lasts around 1,000 words.

Table 8 Year-end/New Year editorials (2010-15)				
	GT		SW	
	Headline	Date	Headline	Date
2010	新年对政府说几句话	Jan 1, 2010	这是你所拥有的时间，这是你能决定的生活	Dec 31, 2009
2011	说点闲话，告别 2010 年	Dec 31, 2010	让每个中国人都金贵起来	Dec 30, 2010
2012	祝新的一年世界好，中国更好	Dec 31, 2011	像一束光簇拥另一束光	Jan 5, 2012
2013	告别 2012，中国迎接 2013 更自信	Dec 31, 2012	我们比任何时候都更接近梦想	Jan 3, 2013
2014	2013，中国人几分满意几分缺憾	Dec 31, 2013	我们是南方周末，我们三十而立	Jan 2, 2014
2015	2014，中国挑破难点更加强大的一年	Dec 31, 2014	你对美好的向往关乎国家的方向	Jan 1, 2015

Reading through these editorials altogether, one could find two interesting similarities:

- Both resort to patriotism, which reflects a sense of responsibility among traditional Chinese intellectuals. Since ancient times, Chinese intellectuals see themselves as bearing the responsibility of “saving the nation from subjugation and ensuring its survival.”¹⁶ Intellectuals perceive themselves as living with the rise and fall of the nation. Both GT and SW introduce this traditional sense of responsibility into their own role as media, and see themselves as part of the efforts for a better future for the nation walking out of historical dust and rising in the international arena.
- Both newspapers have a strong sense of crisis when they take a historical view to look at the development of the vast nation in massive transformation. While the prominent rise of China is discussed and appraised by both, key words like “uncertainty,” “struggle,” “change,” “difficulties,” “complexity” are frequent in the yearly editorials of both newspapers.

¹⁶ In Chinese, “天下兴亡，匹夫有责。”

Keywords: nation vs individual

Chart 3 Mentions of “nation”

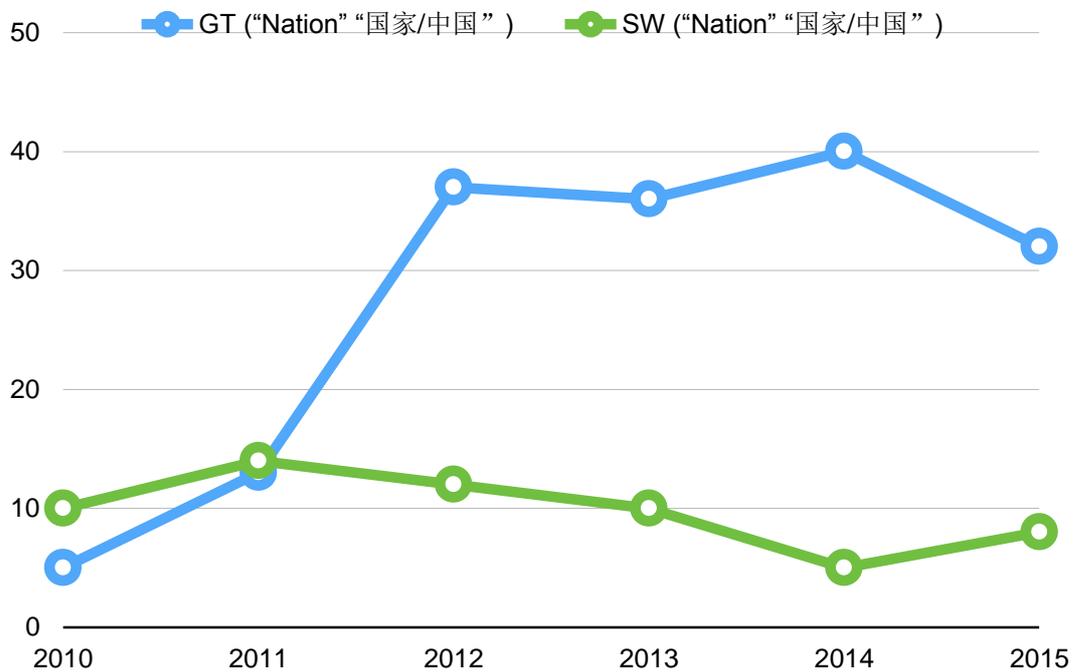
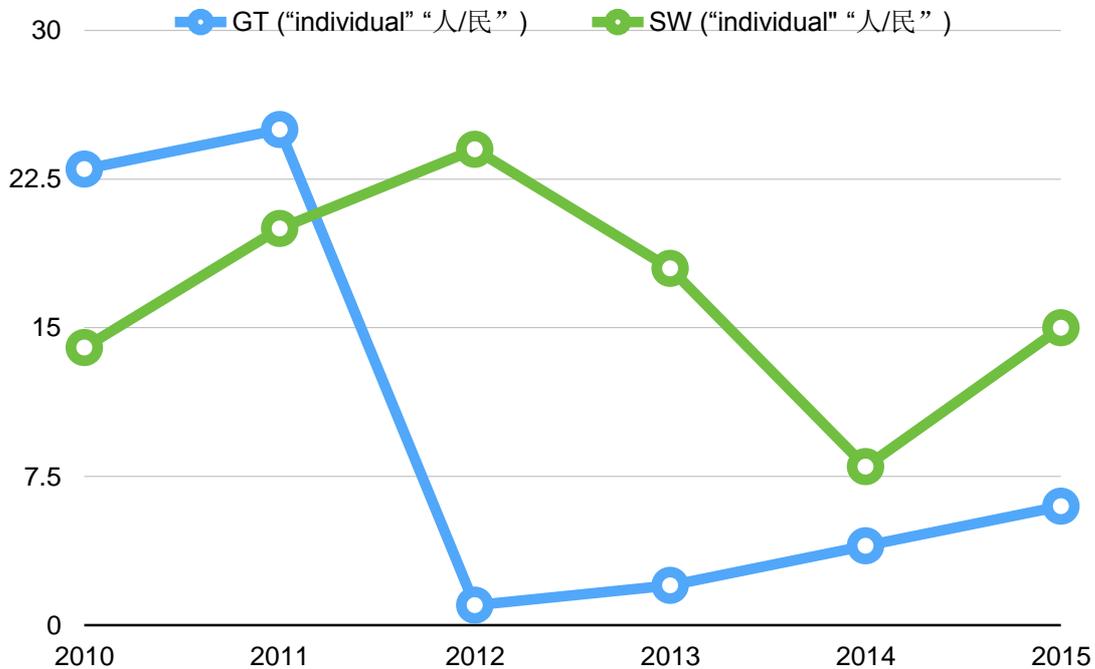


Chart 4 Mentions of “individual”



Keywords: China vs world

Chart 5 Mentions of “China”

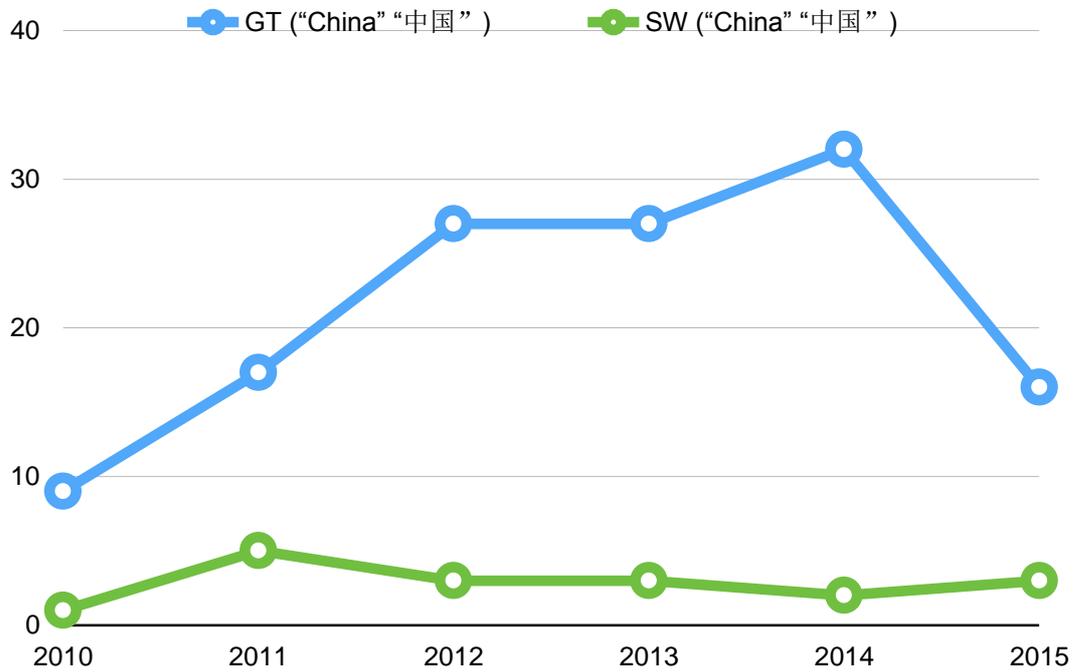


Chart 6 Mentions of “world”

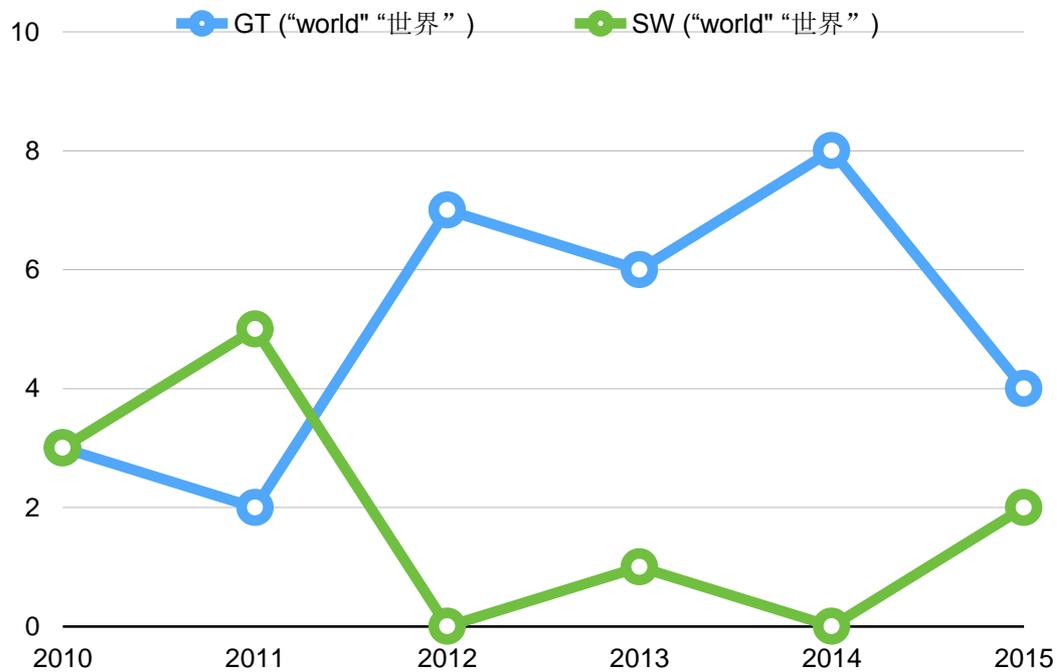


Chart 7, SW special word, “you”

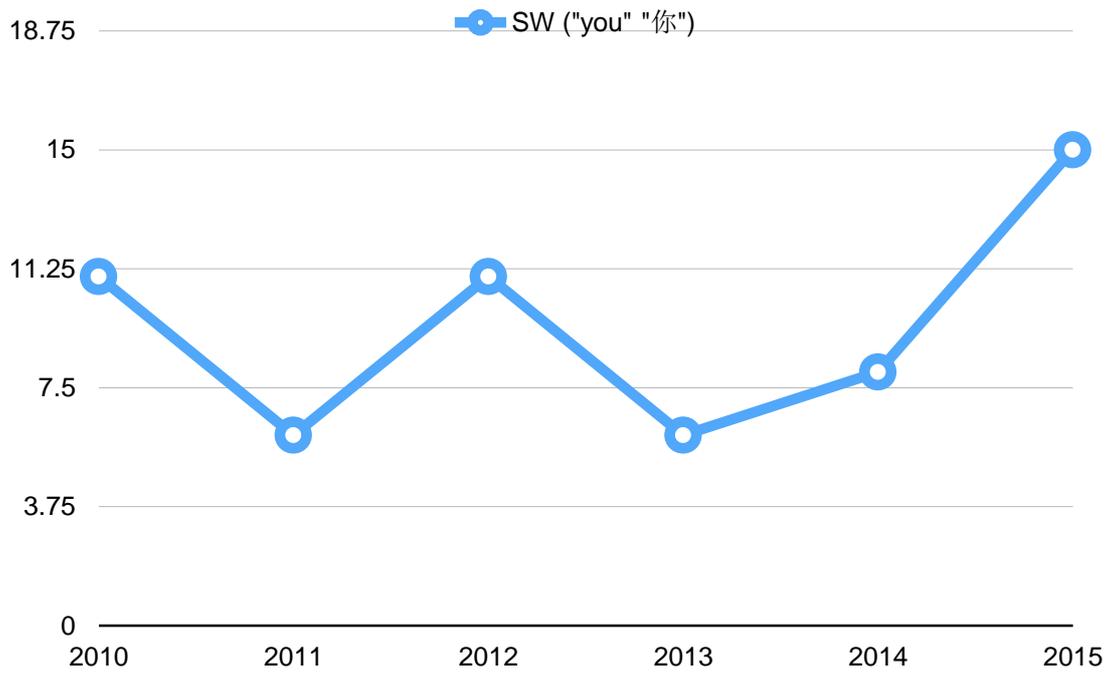
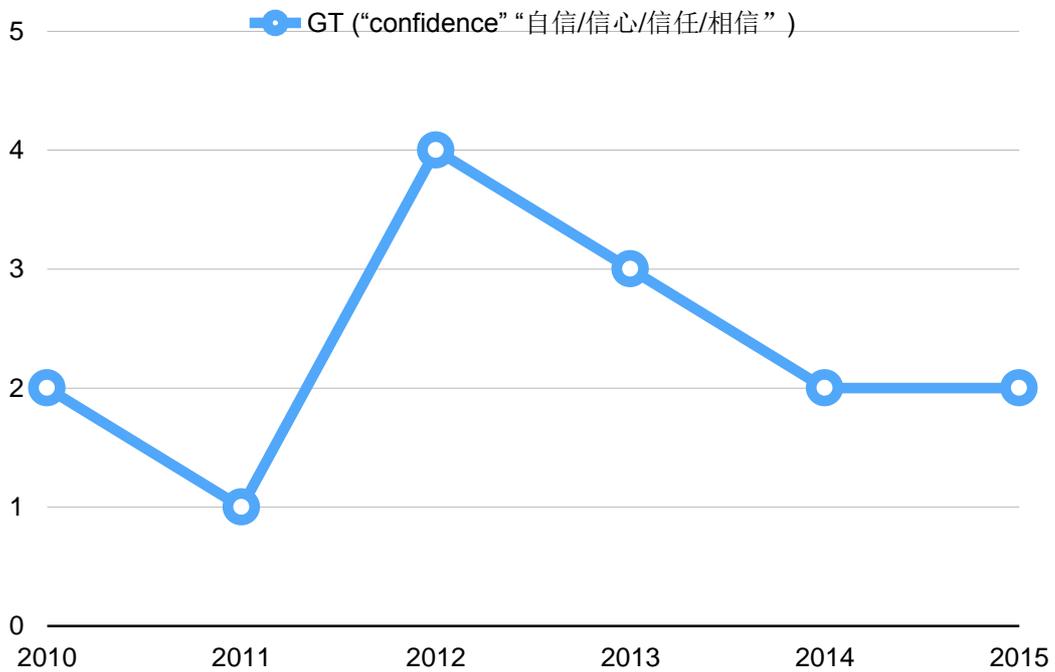


Chart 8, GT special word, “confidence”



Differences are also evident, not just in their linguistic style, but also in what each emphasises in these yearly editorials.

Charts 3 to 6 provide a rough contrast in terms of the mentions of important concepts like “nation” and “individuals,” “China” and “world.” All words found in the sample articles have been checked one by one by this researcher, and those words using same characters but pointing to different meanings have been filtered out.

While talking about difficulties facing China, GT stresses the concepts of “nation” more, whereas SW highlights the concepts of “individuals.” And while both believe that domestic challenges remain most pertinent to China’s current development, GT stresses more than SW the global context in which China explores its own path and the global strategic competition that China cannot afford to lose.

Both newspapers also have their unique “word” that they constantly emphasise. SW frequently uses the word “you” in each of its New Year editorials (see Chart 7), which is one of its prominent linguistic features. This means a direct dialogue with its readers, and the newspaper delivers its expectations on Chinese individuals in this way. The newspaper repeatedly calls for individuals’ initiatives to promote micro-level changes, which will then lead to more macro-level changes in the nation. “It is one and another individual who demonstrates incredible power in breaking barriers, open or hidden, and it is such power that keeps refreshing China’s public agendas and changing the fate of those nobodies who suffer from injustice.” (SW 2011 New Year editorial)

According to these editorials from SW, the individual initiatives that already exist but need to be further boosted include:

- awakening to and sticking to individual rights, responsibility and dignity, which is a prerequisite for building a vigorous civil society;
- participation in national affairs closely related to individual vital interests;
- expression of satisfaction and struggle against social injustice;
- courage of dreaming for a brighter future, striving for it and bringing about change.

In SW New Year editorials, ensuring every single individual’s access to justice, dignity and happiness has been repeatedly highlighted as the most pressing challenge and utmost priority for China’s reform. According to SW, in order to guarantee this, two things should be in place:

First, comprehensive reforms — not only economic, but also political, social and cultural as listed in China’s 12th Five-Year Plan — have to be promoted to release social tension, to guarantee respect for every single individual, and to curb the infringement upon equality, rights and public confidence. Such infringement has been repeatedly seen in the cases of forced house demolition, interception of petitioning, corruption, and arrogance of the children of some officials and rich people.

Second, the authority of the constitution and rule of law will lead the Chinese in pursuing their dreams of both national rejuvenation and individual welfare.

As to GT Year-end editorials, the special word is “confidence.” Compared with SW special word “you,” the frequency of “confidence” is much lower (See Chart 8). But it is a constant key message delivered throughout these editorials.

This message contains two levels: (1) the importance of government credibility, and (2) the importance of overall social confidence in China's own path of development amid huge global uncertainty. According to GT editorials, China's development is being accompanied by more self-confidence among the Chinese, but still, more confidence is needed.

Specifically, "confidence" is mentioned throughout these editorials in the following regards:

- In China, government-public interaction has achieved an unprecedented level. Officials at various levels should have the **confidence** that more public participation means fewer mistakes in decision-making.
- Social discontent will always remain, but ordinary people shouldn't be perceived as troublemakers. There should be **confidence** that in terms of political awareness and capability of participation, the Chinese public is not weaker than their counterparts in developed countries.
- China is fostering the capability of reforming and recovering from problems, but at the same time it is witnessing the loss of social patience due to the exacerbation of these problems. There is a time race between the two. Due to the diversification of public opinion, no one is sure whether China has already passed the turning point before which social cohesion should keep increasing to guarantee efficient development and after which more social division is needed to prioritise fairness. Certainty is especially important for a super-large society like China, which provides a sense of security and supports social **confidence**.
- A sense of security remains the most scarce resource in Chinese society. Chinese people's **confidence** in the stability of policies and the stability of national fortune is accumulating in an uneasy way. Many aren't sure whether national progress will mean less uncertainty in individual lives.
- China's reforms should be consolidated in a way that helps boost social trust and **confidence** in the continuity and acceleration of such reforms. Such trust and **confidence** is pivotal to the existence of public hopes despite various problems. In terms of anti-corruption, social expectations are upgrading, and China is striving toward a clean society with unprecedented efforts. This is an increasingly convincing prospect.
- Due to the nation's overall stability despite so many challenges, Chinese society gradually has the **confidence** that facing challenges, China has more flexibility than people expected. In 2014, positive changes in public opinion sphere and the overall national stability despite the "Occupy Central" movement in Hong Kong boosted social **confidence** in the nation's political security.
- The accumulation of China's determination and power is important. It makes China unique in the world, and it is also the source of more **confidence** in the nation's future.

The priorities stressed by the two newspapers, especially state versus individuals, seem like a left-right characteristic. But again, this doesn't mean their differences go as far as spreading on a left-right spectrum. In a typical left-right paradigm, different sides negate and oppose each other's visions and judgments, which lay the basis for debates. The messages carried in these yearly editorials are subtle and interesting, and reflect the diversification of media in contemporary China. But they do not necessarily cancel each other out, and the diversification generally appears technical and specific.

Chapter 3 Journalists at a turning point

All the cases mentioned in Chapter 2 stimulate a rush of vivid memories in the minds of Chinese journalists. Individual media professionals working for different organisations have different stances when approaching controversial news events. And they do share some basic understanding of China's media environment.

This chapter aims to discuss this environment – mainly the tendency of media debates – through the perspectives of eight Chinese journalists in their early 30s. Reaching the 30-year mark is considered a turning point in a journalist's career in China. Compared with their Western counterparts, Chinese journalists are on average much younger. Many 30-year-olds occupy very important media positions, but many choose to leave the industry around 30. This in turn harms the growth and professionalisation of the Chinese media industry.

In this chapter, we get an interesting genre of interviewees, a relatively elitist and forward-looking group among young Chinese journalists. They are well educated in top universities, at home or abroad. They work for big marketised print media outlets in China, and regularly follow big political and social events. They are in their early 30s, and so far have served in media industry for 7 years on average. They remained in the media industry after 30, and hold interesting observations while struggling with their job. All prefer anonymity in this research paper. As they agreed, their basic information like gender and working experiences are listed in Table 9.

Due to the limited scale of this research project, the aim of this chapter is merely to look into the worries and visions of young journalists, and provide some basic judgments by these journalists on China's media environment.

Table 9 Basic information of interviewees

	Gender	Years in media	Media institutions
A	M	9	marketised state media, Hong Kong media, foreign media in China
B	F	6	independent media
C	M	8	marketised state media
D	F	6	marketised state media
E	F	6	marketised state media, foreign media in China
F	F	9	marketised state media
G	F	6	independent media
H	F	6	marketised state media

In-depth phone interviews have been conducted with the interviewees separately, each lasting around 90 minutes. Below are the three core questions asked:

- Along with the rise of Weibo in 2010, public opinion witnessed unprecedented division. Discussions about a gulf in the traditional media arose, particularly about leftist versus rightist media. How do you see the so-called left-right categorisation within Chinese media? If it fits, what's the future tendency? If not, why?

- Generally what's the prospect for the media debate in the upcoming decade?
- What influence can new media bring to current media debates in China? Will "new media" forcibly initiate a "new" media era in China?

“No single framework fits”

Among the eight interviewees, six say stricter media regulation has been imposed in the past two decades; six think media disparity over social and political events is actually narrowing. Interviewee B, regularly following the domestic dynamics of the political economy, points out that the room for media debates in her area is huge and is apparently widening, especially in the wake of China's anti-corruption campaign.

Seven interviewees believe that although the concepts of “left” and “right” were frequently mentioned in public discussions about the media, these concepts were neither solid nor clear since the beginning, and have been further blurred in the last couple of years. Two point out that according to their observation, an increasing number of media outlets begin to embark on a left-central path. Three believe that the actual dynamics of the media was much more complex than the so-called left-right framework, and that the debates in the public sphere over significant political, social and economic events are dominated by various interest groups, which doesn't necessarily mean pro or against the government.

“Everything is mingled together. This doesn't just happen in China. Media is not necessarily a mirror reflecting a true big picture, but usually a tool used to present certain interests. What is left and what is right? At least the narrative of confronting government and market is way outdated in China. For instance, many state-owned enterprises are listed on the stock market, and related government agenda aims to boost market interests. It's too complicated. And it's even harder to identify who is the interest group behind the media agenda. Right now there is no single framework that fits the Chinese media environment,” said interviewee B.

When talking about prospects of media debates in the upcoming decade, interviewee E mentioned the concept of “safe boundaries” in China's special media scenario. There is largely a consensus among the interviewees that the era in which criticism erupts merely for the sake of criticism has gone. When a news event happens, not just media outlets but the general public focus more on specific controversies, rather than empty grand talks.

“In this sense, China's media ecology is becoming more mature,” says interviewee C. Interviewee E holds that in such circumstances, “media outlets will move more and more toward ‘safe boundaries,’ and there will not be left-right media debates as in some Western countries. These safe boundaries do not necessarily mean grasping a neutral line. Sometimes a media outlet becomes more left, and sometimes more right. In China, government will continue to play a big role in defining these boundaries.”

“Naive” media professionals?

The media industry's weak attraction for talented graduates and loss of mature professionals are a core topic in media career discussions in China. Interviewee A uses “increasingly homogenous and naive” to depict Chinese media professionals, which in his eyes worsens the quality of media debate.

Seven out of the eight interviewees have deep worries about their own career development in the media industry. Only interviewee D expressed staunch passion and loyalty to this

profession. Two already started to move away from media industry. The other five have taken measures to either adjust job contents or swap to new media organisations.

Will “new media” bring a “new” media era?

While the overwhelming wave of new media sweeps the whole world, the Chinese media industry also faces the serious task of transformation. However, interviewees think it is uncertain whether this would mean a new media era in China in the near future.

Five interviewees expressed worries about the development of new media in China. Interviewee A pointed out that the rush to cater to the new media market actually damages quality news. “It is embarrassing that new media arrives at an age when Chinese media industry suffers from a declining quality of media professionals. Instead of launching serious debates on their new media platforms, young journalists sent to operate media apps and websites adopt cheap eye-catching tricks, especially sensational headlines,” interviewee A complained.

Three interviewees pointed out that their media outlets lack a real sense of crisis facing the wave of new media, and there is not yet a profitable new media model in China. “As far as I know, those liberal media outlets also receive funding from the government. There are many new media experiments, but it is uncertain where the payoff points lie,” says interviewee C. Two others among these three interviewees point out that currently the new media teams in traditional Chinese media organisations consist of less competent staff. “We are not motivated at all to work with new media editors. Presenting content online is considered an extra workload. We don’t do it if we don’t want to,” says interviewee H.

As to the influence of new media, interviewees’ opinions vary. “There are more and more specific debates in the Chinese public sphere, which are not just driven by news events, but have become normalised in media debates. It is predictable that such debates will also be driven by new media interests,” interviewee B said. Another two interviewees link new media with innovation. While interviewee E believes the rush for profits actually kills the possibility of innovation, interviewee D thinks media professionals’ individual competency on new media platform will be key for their career.

All these views and observations are heavily influenced by specific media organisations that a journalist works for. But no matter where they work and what stance they hold when approaching specific news events, it is certain that Chinese journalists have a lot to do to get the quality of media debates improved.

Chapter 4 Conclusions

Media diversification in contemporary China is an intriguing phenomenon to observe. It mirrors a clumsy nation walking ahead, trying to strike a balance between state regulation and market competition, between past traditions and modernisation aspirations, between global information flow and its own agenda of public governance. A cleavage between different media outlets is prominent, especially in the wake of controversial news events. Concepts like “leftist” and “rightist” media frequently appear, and complaints of media polarisation and public opinion division are common.

This research paper studied the left-right categorisation of Chinese media. Through comparative analysis, case studies and in-depth interviews, the paper’s basic conclusion is that the left-right categorisation is not appropriate and does not fit China’s current media environment. Beyond this, differences in marketised media outlets’ editorial stances and approaches to controversial news events still deliver very interesting messages about the fragmentation of social interests and the division of public opinion.

No labels please

Media professionals within China largely refuse to be attached to simplistic labels such as “leftist” or “rightist,” as evidenced in the in-depth interviews in Chapter 3. As for The Global Times (GT) and Southern Weekly (SW), there are signs that neither wants to become a label.

According to Sun Yafei (2005), “Previously, Southern Weekly was misunderstood by the public as an embodiment of morality, a bible for media, a rightist newspaper, and a signal to judge political issues. This was not Southern Weekly’s original purpose.”¹⁷

Global Times editor-in-chief Hu Xijin directly responded to the issue of political label in a 2011 interview with Southern People Weekly. “Unfortunately, I don’t like such categorisation. I belong to the group seeking truth from facts, and I encourage others to behave like this too.”¹⁸

Different editorial stances and approaches between the two marketised media outlets stem from contingent market strategies that prove effective in long-term exploration. As marketised newspapers focusing on political affairs, the two actually have to resort to different fields to capture their own readership in the market. More specifically, they resort to international news coverage and domestic investigative reporting, respectively. This fundamental divergence also explains why they demonstrate some characteristics of left-right diversification: one stresses China’s uniqueness in the global context whereas the other highlights state-individual negotiation.

¹⁷ Sun Yafei, 从《南方周末》的三次转型看中国时政媒体的发展方向, 2005, [CLC code] G219.2

¹⁸ Southern People Weekly, 对话《环球时报》总编辑胡锡进：我是一个“复杂中国”的报道者，2011(21), [CLC code] K825.42

“Occupy a foothold in public opinion market”

Intensive market competition still means they have to quickly find and occupy a foothold in the market. Divisive public opinion makes this possible, and media competition in turn exacerbates division of public opinion. Worries over the media’s role in further splitting public opinion are mounting.

This “foothold battle” is not limited to newspapers like GT and SW. There is an argument among media observers that analyses and opinions are of equal if not more value than breaking news in this social media age, because everyone can get the facts with a simple click of the mouse. Marketised media outlets, born with similar political and commercial genes but chanting different slogans in fierce market competition, are eager to win credibility for the attitudes and values they deliver.

As studied in Chapter 2, the two newspapers have contrasting stances in media debates over a set of pivotal issues concerning Chinese reform. Although these contrasts largely do not fall into the left-right framework, they put ahead very different priorities for government agenda and national development. To a certain extent, the huge readerships behind each of the two marketised newspapers represent groups of people endorsing different reform agendas, and this reflects prominent interest fragmentation in current China.

“Specific” rather than “grand” debates

The Chinese media ecology is not a widespread left-right spectrum, it is more like a big picture filled with dots. Different fields and interests are mingled, and a marketised media chooses a specific dot to build upon its own influence. With media prospects filled with uncertainty, media outlets have to give themselves the room to be resilient. As pointed out in Chapter 3, one media organisation can be “left” on one specific issue, and “right” on another at the same time. But generally, they will not walk far toward two linear ends of left and right.

In China at present, media debates largely focus on the specific and technical level of gradual reform, rather than confronting each other with totally different social visions. As pointed out in Chapter 1, GT and SW actually share huge similarities in self-recognition of the media’s role in a transformative era and in their most basic vision of national development.

With that said, specific disagreements can still be very loud, sharp, and fierce. As Chapter 2 shows, debates touched upon raw nerves of China’s modernisation, and consensus is lacking as to how to prioritise all these problems and what approaches should be adopted.

Both GT and SW are outspoken on the specific problems in specific cases, and these problems are exactly the sorest spots in current China and headaches for the government — a credibility crisis of the authorities, official-public tension, social infrastructure and institutions lagging far behind the speed of economic development, outdated governance mechanisms facing soaring social demand and civil awareness, a society unprecedentedly diversified and public opinion unprecedentedly divisive, among others.

It is on these specific, sorest spots that media divergences stand out again and again, as evidenced in comparative studies between GT and SW. One stresses that the bitter reality will remain China's basic national situation for a long period of time, whereas the other emphasizes a vision of China which it wants to be realised. One calls for more self-confidence while navigating the bitter reality, whereas the other presses for an urgent overhaul for the sake of a future dream. One stresses the need to bridge the fragile communication between public and government, and stresses the flexibility of both decision-making and public opinion, which is the only way out for this unique, vast nation struggling with too many grey areas. The other emphasises the delivery of universal values, calling constantly for strong individuals, which it argues are what make up a powerful civil society and powerful nation.

Such debates will not go away in China's massive transformation. The Chinese media, with its traditional sense of responsibility and sense of crisis, will continue to discuss possible ways to find compromise between bitter social realities and better social scenarios.

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