

Digital News and Negotiated Agency:
The Digital Transition within China's Newspapers

Mengshu Chen

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By: Mengshu Chen

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Signed by the final examining committee:

_____	Chair
Dr. Lynda Clarke	
_____	External Examiner
Dr. Guobin Yang	
_____	External to Program
Dr. Kimberly Manning	
_____	Thesis Supervisor
Dr. Sandra Gabriele	
_____	Examiner
Dr. Mia Consalvo	
_____	Examiner
Dr. Juliette De Maeyer	

Approved by

Dr. Krista Lynes, Graduate Program Director

9/8/2021

Dr. Pascale Sicotte, Dean
Faculty of Arts and Science

ABSTRACT

Digital News and Negotiated Agency: The Digital Transition within China's Newspapers

Mengshu Chen, Ph.D.
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This dissertation brings the case of China, where journalism is practiced under a different political system than the West, into the global conversation about changing media practices in the digital era. By building on the research traditions of the sociology of media production and adopting a social constructivist approach towards technological change in relation to communication, this study examines how digitization is taking form at three digital newspapers. Through newsroom observation and in-depth interviews, it reveals the ways in which different social powers shape each newspaper's path towards digitization. Moreover, the role of journalists in news production is addressed through an investigation of how journalists self-identify in the context of a changing media field and, in return, of how journalists' practices affect the way that journalism is defined. My observations of what they say and do provide a window to examine the ideas and values of the Chinese social system.

My study finds that the impact of digital technology on these three newspapers is ambivalent. While news production in all three newsrooms was adjusted to meet the new standard of online news, the level of new technology involved and the level of expertise were subject to available resources and investment at each organization. The Chinese state's strong political motivation to control the media combined with the media's pragmatic response to a changing field are two pertinent factors that affected the media's performance. From a historical perspective, this research shows that the swing pattern that occurred during commercialization continued into the digital era. The changes at the three newsrooms also indicate a noteworthy turn in the Chinese media system. With economic crisis looming, a new form of party organ is in formation. Most critically, the current economic crisis has had a concerning effects on the mindset of Chinese journalists. A higher level of self-censorship is at play at all three newsrooms, while journalists' conventional, top-down views towards their audience persist. However, journalists actively seek new ways to claim expertise away from the party line, primarily focusing on innovating new news forms as well as developing skills and techniques.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Contested News, Contested Journalism

When I started my Ph.D. journey in 2014, traditional media in China had just started to experience the brutal crisis brought by social media. Although the internet arrived in China as early as 1994, it wasn't until 2013 that the press's economic model based on advertising revenue was challenged, newspapers were forced to move online, and they struggled to reinstate their financial stability and influence. Compared to their Western counterparts, who had already been in this battle for a long time, Chinese newspapers were far behind in terms of building infrastructures and reforming practices. By that time, Western newspapers had already launched different kinds of experiments: some, like *The New York Times*, built a pay wall on its digital outlets; others, like *Politico*, relied on donations and public funds, because they believed that journalism could not and should not be supported by markets; while other media organizations believed that the freeness of the internet would be hard to alter, hence they remained free and looked for revenue elsewhere. More significantly, most of these organizations had adopted a digital-first strategy and innovated the form and content of their outlet in order to meet the expectation, of the public. Significant changes regarding the way that news is produced, circulated, and consumed are taking place, contesting some core values of journalism.

Scholars in the field of media studies are trying to capture the tensions of the changing field in the wake of digital technologies. Studies focus on a wide range of topics in relation to news, from shifting practices, contested ideas and values (Boczkowski; Hemmingway; Robinson; Anderson, *Rebuilding the News*; Boyer; Batsell), innovation procedures and the interactions among agents (Hemmingway; Czarniawska; Paulussen; Braun; Rodgers), and to paths and approaches in different social context (Domingo and Paterson, *Making Online News*; Hallin and Mancini; Yin and Liu; Sparks et al.; Hanitzsh et al.), etc. While scholars and practitioners struggle to agree on a singular understanding of the digital transformation and a clear future for media and journalism, they do agree that the evolution of journalism is entangled with transformations and continuities of the profession in face of new technologies (Boczkowski; Mitchelstein and Boczkowski; Meikel and Redden; Anderson; Boyer). For example, notions of immediacy and objectivity have been and continue to be the defining terms of journalism since the very beginning, with practices and routines in place to concretize these values.

However, the way these values and principles are perceived and practiced has evolved over time as a result of technological development and social transition. Immediacy is now the equivalent of nonstop news updates 24/7, and journalists are reconsidering conventional practices regarding objectivity in the face of the spread of misinformation and politicized discourse on social media. It is from the interaction between embedded ideas and practices and the social advancement that current practices have emerged. In other words, newsmaking practices are evolving in light of news technologies with new phenomena rising and influencing news, and conventional values are fighting to adapt. Therefore, a historical perspective is crucial in order to fully understand how journalism is being contested today. As Boczkowski argues,

Culture and material changes do not proceed in a historical vacuum but are influenced by the legacy of processes that preceded them. In other words, these changes are the products of long historical processes that embed past contestations and settlements. Hence, the analyst has to look not only at ongoing transformations in the artefact under study, but also at related dynamics that happened before (sometimes long before) such an artefact came into being. (10)

Moreover, not only is our understanding of what news is and how and why it is produced constantly being contested, there is also an opening towards a more diversified concept of journalism itself around the world (Deuze and Witschge; George; Hallin and Mancini; Hanitzsh et al.). The digital transition is a transnational movement that brings together professionals from many different media systems and journalistic cultures, and it invites us to compare how a shared discourse and overlapping practices take root and have meaning in very different national contexts (Grave 614). This is where this dissertation fits in: to contribute to the international research regarding the shifting state of journalism and to answer the question of how digital transformation is taking place at Chinese newspaper organizations under the influence of a variety of cultural, economic, and political factors in contemporary China.

In her opening remarks for a selection of works on the changing face of journalism today, Zelizer said,

How would our understanding of journalism look different were we to insist not on a unitary model of journalism—one which assumes that an elevated form of news works in prescribed ways to better the public good across contexts—but on various kinds of journalisms with necessarily multiple facets, definitions, circumstances and functions. (“Introduction” 1)

The Chinese media system, as well as the everyday experiences of Chinese journalists, speaks volumes about this plurality. Rooted in Chinese history and shaped by the social system of modern China, journalistic culture in China is complex. There is no doubt that the political power plays a significant role, but other social forces have emerged that influence Chinese media practice. The digital transition is another force following commercialization that has set off a renegotiation among different social agencies in newsrooms, contesting the role of media institutions in Chinese society and newsmaking practices. Therefore, a comprehensive assessment of the state of the Chinese media is required to fully understand the features of Chinese media and its diverse practices. As Sparks proposed, future studies of Chinese media should “try to place it within a broader perspective which admits the existence of practices that are not directly concerned with the struggle for free media (“Beyond Political Communication” 63). By leaning on the research tradition of the sociology of media production, this study demonstrates how journalism is understood and practiced daily on a micro level at three Chinese newspapers—*Pengpai*, *The Kaiping News*, and *The Yunnan Daily*—going through the digital transition and reveals the power dynamics inside the newsroom during this process. It also dives into the cultural and historical roots that shaped the Chinese media system to provide a nuanced understanding of its everyday practices. Attending to Chinese practices will be valuable as we look into the “systematic variations,” as Benson puts it, in today’s digital media landscape (43).

1.2. Newsroom Ethnography

This study follows the research tradition of media sociology or, to be more precisely, the study of news production using an ethnographic approach. Being the dominant source of employment and organization of work in journalism, the newsroom has always been a crucial site of study in the history of journalism studies (Deuze and Witschge 169). By situating media research within the dynamics of social forces, media sociology links news production to questions about order, conflict, identity, stratification, authority, community, and power (Waisbord 1). Early newsroom ethnographic studies made during the 1970s and 1980s provide in-depth understanding of the social making of news and ideal guidelines for describing rules, roles, and processes as well as their interrelations and implications in newsrooms. To use Paterson's words, "through direct contact with news professionals and their daily activities, newsroom ethnographers can come close to providing an adequate description of the culture and practice of media production, and the mindset of media producers" (2). The pioneering scholars at that time—such as Altheide (1976), Bantz et al. (1980), Epstein (1973), Ericson et al. (1987), Fishman (1980), Gans (1979), Gitlin (1980), Golding and Elliott (1979), Murphy (1976), Tuchman (1978), and Soloski (1989)—extensively explored the organizational, bureaucratic, and professional nature of news production (Cottle 3). This body of literature offers valuable insights into the function of media organizations, the decision-making process in news production, the journalist's autonomy in newsmaking, and the effect of social constraints, and it continues to serve as an essential framework for today's research of news production.

A second wave of newsroom ethnography emerged in the early 2000s in response to dissatisfaction with studies of digital news production in the late 1990s, which "suffered from a methodological deficiency," as Steensen puts it (322). While in general the first wave of newsroom ethnography focused on the overall working experience in newsrooms (newsroom structure, routines, principles and values, etc.), the recent studies are more attentive to the effect of digital technology on newsmaking practices and journalistic values. In response to early utopian assumptions about new technology that held technology as the determinant of journalistic practices (Pavlik), scholars quickly turned attention to the way in which new technologies integrate into a particular newsroom setting and further impact news practices and values. Scholars such as Anderson, Batsell, Boczkowski, Boyer, Braun, Czarniawska, Domingo and Paterson, Hemingway, Rodgers, and Usher have examined how journalism is being reinvented in the face of the opportunities and challenges presented by new technology in a wide variety of ways, including structural changes within media organizations, online news formats and values, the integration of new technology in newsrooms, expanding networks of news production, user participation, and changes in the professional identity of journalists, and so on. These studies rely on empirical data collected through ethnographic fieldwork to understand the process of innovation in newsroom settings and the interaction between technological change and journalism as a profession. As Cottle puts it,

Newsroom ethnography has yet generated some of the most penetrating insights into the complexities and levels of analysis required in the empirical exploration of media production", and in the context of shifting newsmaking practices in light of the technological development, it remains as vital as ever for improved understanding of the powered dynamic of news communications. (13)

There are considerable differences between today's newsroom ethnographies and the classic studies of the 1970s and 1980s. Anderson argues that there is a tendency to look up in early newsroom ethnographies, meaning scholars seek to connect field-level observations to structural and more widespread cultural tendencies, while contemporary newsroom ethnographies are more concerned with how the newsroom is shifting and its innovation mechanism ("Newsroom Ethnography and Historical Context" 65-66). In other words, the classic studies looked at news production in its social context, aiming to provide an overall explanation of newsmaking and its connection to various social elements, while the recent wave zooms in on the specific issue of the impact of technological innovation on newsroom practices and journalism. In addition, in order to achieve a more nuanced assessment of the changing state of media organization and journalism, the contemporary newsroom ethnography has expanded its scope beyond the classic newsroom studies, integrating different research traditions, including media history, the social construction of technology, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), and the anthropology of technology. At the same time, there is a growing consciousness among scholars about the historical contingency of their findings, which, in Anderson's view, opens up an understanding of newsrooms as more precarious artifacts than they were seen as before (66). Such a shift also reflects transitions in contemporary journalism from a more or less coherent industry to a profession that includes a highly varied and diverse range of practices (Deuze and Witschge 166).

However, concerns have been raised regarding the lack of explanatory power in addressing the underlying social power dynamic of today's newsroom ethnography compared to classic studies (Anderson, "Newsroom Ethnography"; Benson; Deuze and Witschge). To borrow Benson's words, there is an indifference to systematic explanation within the "new descriptivist" media studies, such as those drawing on ANT. As he argues, "committed to comprehensiveness, its descriptions often lose sight of the (contextual) forest for the trees; highly observant of heterogeneity, it fails to see patterned variation; careful not to impose normative judgments, it refuses to draw obvious connections to real-world concerns and possible solutions" (34). For example, Benson took issue with Anderson and Kreiss's 2013 study of the political maps used during the 2008 US elections. He suggests that, by focusing on the function of the maps in delivering votes, the study overlooked the power relations involved in the making of maps (Benson 31). While acknowledging the value provided by the thick description of the newsroom that these studies have to offer, Benson insists that insight into systemic problems and covert patterns should carry equal importance (44).

Meanwhile, Deuze and Witschge echo C.W. Anderson ("Blowing Up the Newsroom") and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen's critiques about relying too much on the newsroom as the only legitimate site for news production. By conducting research into newsrooms and consolidating the practices of journalism education, academic works reinforce the status quo of the normative model of journalism (Deuze and Witschge 169). To avoid "newsroom centrism," as Wahl-Jorgensen puts it, one should be aware that the walls of the newsroom, "both physical and literal, are shifting dramatically" (Anderson, "Blowing Up the Newsroom" 187). The scale of the journalistic field under the scope of early ethnographic researchers has been broadened; therefore, the place of newsrooms in news production should be reevaluated.

Facing these risks, Anderson proposes to employ "genealogical ethnography" to go beyond the emic level of demonstration to in-depth explanation. By genealogical ethnography, he refers to "an ethnographic sensibility that sees newsrooms as both embedded within and subject to the passage of time, and that seeks to understand the way different technologies, material forms of

evidence, organizational process, culture values, and developments of rhetoric both evolve over time and are currently embedded in different spaces and institutional routines” (“Newsroom Ethnography and Historical Context” 65). Using his own work *Rebuilding the News* (published in 2013) as an example, Anderson explains that he was only able to uncover the underlying cultural issues that caused technical problems by looking at the history of news values over time (“Newsroom Ethnography and Historical Context” 74).

Prenger and Deuze echo this call for historical analysis and take it to another scale by suggesting that the effect of technology on the current transformation of journalism might be overestimated. By examining the path of innovation media has taken in the past, they argue that the transformation of journalism and its entrepreneurialism is a process directed by journalism’s strong occupational value system and fueled by audiences and practitioners’ frustrated expectations of professional journalism, heightened competition in the news industry, and determined leading professionals (248). Therefore, “any research into innovation, transformation, and entrepreneurialism should take the profound role of the occupational ideology into account” (250). This proposition of combining media history and newsroom ethnography might provide a way to respond to Benson’s call for a more theoretical analysis into the power dynamics embedded in journalistic practices.

Another problematic trend is the uneven attention given to successful legacy media organizations, which further limits “the range of understanding the definition of journalism” (Deuze and Witschge 169). In “A Manifesto of Failure of Digital Journalism,” Wahl-Jorgensen calls for research into the failed cases. She highlights the conflicts and struggles of journalists in their daily practices documented by some works, such as studies by Boczkowski and Usher, and points out that it is essential to acknowledge that adaptation to change can be painful and difficult with failure a likely outcome (261). Therefore, it is essential to study down, meaning to look at more mundane media organizations and the daily life of their journalists, which may bear more significance for our understanding of the transition of the news. To use Wahl-Jorgensen’s own words,

However, I would argue that the ice cream gazettes [*meaning poorly resourced local media*] are, in fact, *more* representative of the material circumstances of the professions today, and the kind of journalism that are possible as a result. . . . They also represent the very real and embodied struggle for survival that is at the heart of the everyday experience of journalists, and without understanding their occasional successes and regular failures, we know little about what is going on within the professions we proclaim to study. (264-265)

This study is structured with these arguments in mind. While newsrooms remain the focus of the research, I am aware that their role has shifted and so should our approach to investigating them. To start with, there are questions worth asking regarding the changing role of the newsroom in newsmaking procedures, such as staff composition, the division of power, the assignments accomplished in the newsroom as well as those that are not, and the newsroom’s relationship with other sites. I believe *the absent* bears equal importance as *the present* in shedding light on transitions. Second, the three newsrooms studied in this dissertation are in very different situations. While *Pengpai* more closely resembles the “typical newsroom” with great influence and success that is usually the focus of academic studies, *The Kaiping News* and *The Yunnan Daily* are the “ice cream gazettes” that may better reflect the struggles that hundreds of other local newsrooms are

now facing. The gap between the newsrooms can speak for itself, showing the difficulties that new organizations face today and reminding us of the diversity of journalistic practice. Finally, bringing in the history of journalism in China and to evaluating the practices at three newsrooms as a whole contributes to a more nuanced assessment of the general state of journalistic practice in China. I would not claim these three newsrooms as representatives of all the Chinese newspapers, but I do hope that this study can shed light on the general patterns, if there are any, of Chinese media evolution and its relation to new technologies and societal changes on the local, national, and global level.

1.3. Research Questions

By building on the research traditions of the sociology of media production (Anderson, *Rebuilding the News*; Boczkowski; Boyer; Domingo and Paterson; Gans; Paterson and Domingo; Tuchman) and adopting a social constructivist approach towards technological change in relation to communication, this study seeks to understand the way that journalism is performed and understood in digital newspapers in China by studying three newsrooms: *Pengpai*, *The Kaiping News*, and *The Yunnan Daily*. In addition to describing of the state of practice at these three newspapers, I will also reveal the way in which different social powers shape the newspaper's digitization path. Moreover, the role of journalists in news production is addressed, examining how journalists, as licensed agents of symbolic power, practice their agency by constantly making choices and decisions in interacting with the other social agents in play. My observation of their practices provides a window to look into the ideas and values of the Chinese social system. And finally, this dissertation will address the question of how journalists seek to identify themselves in the context of a changing media field and how their practices might affect the way we understand journalism in return. To achieve that goal, my research will be guided by one main question and three sub-questions:

Main question: What are the effects of digital technologies on news production at digital newspapers in China, and how does the current shift in newsmaking practices affect the way in which journalists interact with other social and state forces in their everyday work?

Q1: How do newsmaking practices at China's digital newspapers shift in light of new technologies?

Q2: What are the social, historical, political, and economic forces that influence the ways new technologies are adopted in newsmaking practices?

Q3: In what ways is the journalist's gatekeeping role shifting in relation to changing newsmaking practices? If it is changing, how does this new role affect journalists' perception of their profession?

I structure my research around three central concepts: technological change, newsmaking practices, and journalistic culture, with a focus on digital newspapers in China. This study follows the research tradition of newsroom ethnography, which investigates the practices of and values in news production, and further reveals the power play of different social agents through the lenses of individual journalists. By focusing on what individual journalists say and do, I will examine newsmaking as a set of decisions, routines, and power structures, concretizing the interplay of covert power into a set of specific newsroom practices.

The nuanced perspective towards technological change adopted by second-wave newsroom ethnography is essential for this study. As Boczkowski indicates, “new media emerge by merging existing socio-material infrastructures with novel technical capability and this evolution is influenced by a combination of historical conditions, local contingencies, and process dynamics” (12). He argues that the ethnographic study of new media is a project of localizing and historicizing. The exercise of localization aims at understanding the interrelation between technological artifacts, social context, political influences, newsroom culture, and human constructions, while historicization “helps to situate fine-grained but temporally limited case studies within more extended patterns of continuity and disruption” (ibid). In the case of Chinese media, this exercise of localization and historicization has multiple layers. As Chapter 2 will show in detail, behind the backdrop of media development, there is the evolution of the socioeconomic situation in China as a whole. Secondly, the particular features of the Chinese media system play a critical role. Notably, the system displays what I would call “double duality,” meaning that two types of media structures—the organs of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the commercial organizations—coexist in China, and the latter operate under “double standards.” The commercial media are recognized as private corporations financially but remain state-owned agencies politically. In addition, China is a vast country, and it would be a mistake to assume that all media organizations follow the same model. In fact, China has lacked a consistent plan for marketization and digitization, as well as a coherent professional ideology, and therefore the strategies that media organizations have taken have been highly diverse and provisional (Pan; Sparks “Beyond Political Communication”; Sparks et al.; Wang and Sparks “Marketing Credibility”). As Sparks points out, “it is surely time to recognize a plurality of strategies amongst Chinese media organizations and a plurality of journalisms, rather than one single model” (“Beyond Political Communication” 62).

In the context of such nuances, this study examines the impact of technology by adopting a social constructivist point of view towards technology, gaining insights into how different actors become involved in the space of the newsroom as well as how social powers on multiple levels—the individual, the organizational, and the societal—shape the process. I understand new technology as an actor within a continually evolving network that constructs news. In a second step, I will highlight journalists’ efforts and their negotiated agency in everyday news production practices and seek to understand their gatekeeping role and the way they perceive journalism. Moving beyond the domestic differences and dominant political discourse of China’s media studies, it is my intention to reveal the values and ideas that guide Chinese journalists, illuminating who they are, how they practice journalism, what journalistic professionalism means to them, and how they understand their role in the ever-changing media landscape. By acting as a tool of production and as a medium of news production and dissemination, technology is not only a direct agent but also an indirect actor, connecting and affecting other agents at multiple levels. At a micro level, technological changes contest ideas about who is a journalist and what is professional journalistic work; at the meso level, they affect newsroom routines and organizational structures; and finally,

economic dynamics and media systems are changing at a macro level (Yin and Liu). Continuities and ruptures will be assessed historically to better understand the impact of digital technology in the Chinese context. During a time when journalism is evolving rapidly in light of technological advancements, this dissertation aims to offer a “corrective to speculative claims and theories about the digital news media” (Cottle 1) as opposed to the popular understanding of media in China as unified party propaganda.

1.4. Methodology

In order to answer these research questions, this study relies on newsroom ethnography as its main method. Three newsrooms were selected as examination sites to investigate the way in which different social powers interact with each other during news production and its implications for journalistic culture in China. I am aware that the field of journalism has expanded significantly beyond the physical space of the newsroom, but I believe a thorough analysis of the activities and interactions in the space remains a crucial starting point in understanding the state of journalism in the digital age. As Deuze and Witschge argue, journalism is transitioning towards a highly varied and diverse range of practices, and, in this chaotic age, the newsroom continues to be an important anchoring point for newswork (166).

1.1.1. The Three Newsrooms

To better illustrate the dynamics of online newsmaking at digital newspapers, I studied three different newsrooms: *Pengpai*, *The Kaiping News*, and *The Yunnan Daily*. These three digital outlets were all initially operated by local newspaper organizations that traditionally enjoyed a leading position in their locale. *Pengpai* has since grown into a national online outlet, while the other two remain local. *The Kaiping News* and *The Yunnan Daily*, two news organizations with different statuses that operate independently, belong to the same news group.¹ However, they adopted different strategies in the process of digitization: *The Kaiping News* provides local news and community services; *The Yunnan Daily* is trying to reestablish its influence and to reach a younger public through its mobile applications, yet these endeavours are greatly troubled by its duty as a party organ. *Pengpai* was formerly a local newspaper. It made its name nationally by providing critical reporting in the first two years or so after it went online, but its editorial strategies have since taken a turn towards the party line as a result of stricter control.

Operating under different strategies, these three cases are quite distinct in terms of newsroom scale, news content, and target market. Each represents a fragment of the media landscape in China.

¹ This is a result of a nationwide media conglomeration initiative that took place in China’s media marketization process. Such groups are usually headed by the party organ and consist of several other commercial titles in the same city.

Pengpai's great success is the product of a specific time in history and is representative of the CCP's recent push towards media convergence. The struggles of *The Kaiping News* and *The Yunnan Daily* are relatively widely shared by other newspapers but differ greatly due to their status. By examining these three newsrooms, I would like to paint a diverse picture of how journalism is practiced by digital newspapers in contemporary China and the shifting mindset of Chinese journalists. What's more, comparing the three outlets allows me to move beyond the specificity of each case to build an argument about general trends and common factors that could contribute to our understanding of "socialistic journalism with Chinese characteristics" (Bartlett and Vavrus 15). A comparative approach sheds light on how similar technology leads to different outcomes and how seemingly distinct phenomena may be related to similar trends or ideas. The goal is to understand the similarities and particularities of newsmaking in each newsroom in pursuit of digitization, to analyze the assemblage of human and nonhuman actors and the interconnections that produce them, and to reveal the shifting power relations in the process.

- *Pengpai*

The media organization that gave birth to *Pengpai*, *Oriental Morning Post*, was a local commercial newspaper started in 2003 with a readership among the young social elite in Shanghai. The newspaper built its reputation on providing economic information to the region as well as international news. Facing a sharp decrease in advertising income and the migration of audiences to mobile platforms, *Oriental Morning Post* launched the digitization project known as *Pengpai* on July 22, 2014, with at least two objectives in mind: to construct an influential online news network and to find a sustainable economic model (Peter et al.). The project included a newly designed website, a news application for mobile devices, and official pages on major social media with nationwide coverage. An English version of *Pengpai* called *Sixth Tone* was launched on April 5, 2016, marking a significant move into the global market for a Chinese media company. Following the success of the online news outlets, the print newspaper *Oriental Morning Post* ceased publishing on January 1, 2017. *Pengpai* is now considered to be in the vanguard of newspaper digitization in China. Initially, the newsroom established a strategy of providing in-depth, and sometimes critical, news about current events and exploring the use of radio and video apart from the newspaper's textual practices. Because of its active participation in public events and its initially liberal-leaning editorial policy, *Pengpai* soon gained considerable popularity nationwide. However, due to the tightening control of the CCP and *Pengpai*'s economic reliance on government funding, its editorial policy has shifted towards propaganda in recent years. As I will argue later, it has become a new type of party organ.

Nevertheless, *Pengpai* transformed from a local newspaper into one of the most influential digital news outlets with national coverage in just a few years. At the end of 2017, the app had a combined total of 8.6 million daily active users—eight times the number in March 2016—with each visit lasting an average of 18 minutes and 15 seconds. In terms of social media presence, it has 1.4 million WeChat subscribers and 5.7 million Weibo followers.² *Pengpai* is a free digital newspaper, and there is no intention to introduce any kind of payable subscription in the future. A previous study documented an increase in monthly advertising income from 1–2 million RMB in

² The statistics included in this section were obtained directly from *Pengpai*.

2014 to 5–6 million RMB in 2015, and a total advertising income of approximately 60 million RMB in 2015 (Peter et al. 507). However, that amount covers only roughly half of their yearly expenses. During my interview in 2018, one journalist who is familiar with the situation claimed that *Pengpai* had reached financial balance, but I was not able to verify that claim with leadership.

- *The Kaiping News*

The Kaiping News is the online outlet of *The Chun Cheng Evening Post (CCWB)*, one of the largest local newspapers in Kunming, the capital of the southeastern province of Yunnan. It is a commercial news outlet run by *The Yunnan Daily Media Group* since 1980, focusing on local news and community services. Being the dominant local outlet, *CCWB* remained profitable thanks to the local advertising market until 2014. Its highest yearly income has reached 300 million, according to leadership (personal interview, May 7, 2018). The press set up its own online newsroom in charge of news production for the website *CCWB.cn* and their social media pages in 2011. The digital news outlet began as a copy of the print version, almost entirely financed by the print newspaper's revenue. Hit by significant revenue loss in 2015, the newspaper was forced to adjust their digital strategy, prioritizing the use of mobile applications and video production. However, under the shadow of economic difficulties and uncertainty about the future of the local newspaper, the leadership was in constant dispute regarding its digitization strategy.

The Kaiping News is so far a free product, and it had over 600,000 mobile users by May 2018 according to its director. Its WeChat account has 300,000 subscribers, and the number of Weibo followers is 9.5 million.³ The director admitted that the online newspaper was still in the stage of “burning money,” and that situation was not going to change anytime soon. Their priority at this stage was to explore the market for a local digital news outlet: What does “local” media mean in the digital age? Where is its place? How can they maintain their presence in the city while the print newspaper is becoming less important in people's daily lives? The digital news outlets initially adopted the name of the newspaper because of the brand's influence among the local public. But eventually the online paper was renamed *The Kaiping News* in an effort to rebrand in March 2019 in order to appeal to a younger public.

- *The Yunnan Daily*

In contrast to the previous two newsrooms, *The Yunnan Daily* is a provincial party organ in the province of Yunnan. Founded on March 4, 1950, it runs under the direct control of the Provincial Party Committee. In response to the perceived weakening influence of party newspapers, *The Yunnan Daily* launched its own mobile application in 2015 to appeal to the general public, especially the younger generations. Apart from its own news outlet, the newspaper also oversees several government-mandated digital outlets, including the news portal *Yunnan.cn* and three sub-websites written in foreign languages (English, Thai, and Burmese) as an effort to establish an international presence. Burdened by its party-organ legacy and dazzled by the diversified digital strategies that commercial newspapers are experimenting with, *The Yunnan Daily* struggles to find

³ Numbers directly obtained from *The Kaiping News*.

its place in today's media landscape.

The newspaper has 800,000 WeChat subscribers, and only 57,000 followers on Weibo, much lower than the other two outlets. However I was not able to verify the number of users of its mobile application. Unlike the other two newsrooms, the print newspaper remains the most important product of the news organization. As a party organ, its finances are assured by steady subscriptions and party subvention. Therefore, its motivation for moving online is purely political, and their approach is relatively conservative compared to the other two newsrooms. One piece of evidence to demonstrate this assertion: they only launched the first update of the mobile application in 2019, four years after the first version went online. Their current preoccupation is to relocate the website within a media landscape that has been greatly altered in light of the new media dynamics.

1.1.2. Methods

In order to collect sufficient data to answer my research questions, two methods were employed in this study: newsroom observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews. In addition, a brief content analysis was conducted to generate a general description of the use of new technology in their reporting. This research is confidential. However, it is worth mentioning that the majority of the journalists expressed no concerns about me using their name. To my understanding, there are two possible reasons for this. The first has to do with my own consciousness of the sensitive nature of journalism. This study is structured around the industry's digital transition with a focus on daily activities and personal experience. While the subject's relationship with political power might be an issue in some cases, it is not in the majority, and I have been very careful in the way I form questions. Second, the journalists that I talked to were all very familiar with the standards and limits set around their practices. As I later argue, they constantly exercise a high level of self-censorship, and thus they had control of the parameters of our conversation. Nevertheless, I have chosen to maintain their confidentiality, and, as detailed below, measures were taken to ensure the safety of the data.

1. Newsroom Observation

In the context of newsroom ethnography, observation refers to “the research method that involves the researcher spending considerable time in the field, observing and talking to journalists as they go about their daily tasks and documenting their professional practices and culture” (Cottle 4). By immersing myself in the newsroom environment, I directly witnessed newsroom actions, processes, and conflicts, and I also gained a “confident status,” as Paterson refers to it, with some journalists, which facilitated communication during the interviews. The fieldwork took place between March 29 and April 13, 2018, at *Pengpai*; April 23 to May 18, 2018, at *The Kaiping News*; and May 21 to June 1, 2018, at *The Yunnan Daily*. *Pengpai* employs more than 400 journalists, a large portion of whom were former print employees. Their working space spreads over five different floors in the building, making it impossible for my study to cover everything. Therefore, I chose to focus on the visualization center, which is *Pengpai*'s founding team and remains the center of non-textual content production. Meanwhile, my observation at both *The Kaiping News* and *The Yunnan Daily* took place in digital newsrooms separated from the print staff.

Before carrying out observation in the newsrooms, I examined the websites and mobile applications of these three news outlets to gain an overview of the range of their news content, the structure of their platforms, the level of interactivity, and the ways that nonconventional elements such as video, audio, and user-generated content were used in reporting. In all three sites, the person in charge of the newsroom would introduce me to the staff in the beginning and explain briefly how my observation would take place. I walked around the tables during the first days to collect staff members' biographical information and introduce myself to key figures in the newsroom (team directors, authors of pertinent works that I had identified previously, etc.). I would let them know that I might stay close as they worked or had discussions with their coworkers. In a typical day, I usually started from a base I set up in the newsroom where I could see the action without being particularly visible. In the case of *Pengpai*, my base was a couch on the side of the newsroom for journalists to talk with their guests or occasionally take a nap. In *The Kaiping News*, it was a conference table outside the director's office. *The Yunnan Daily* has a much smaller newsroom, so I usually stayed at the end of the two long tables.

I would walk around the newsroom throughout the day and pause to talk to the journalists. Sometimes I sat with a journalist, usually someone I was already familiar with, to observe their daily work. During the observation, I focused on evidence in relation to newsmaking practices and the role of journalists in decision-making processes as directed by my research questions, understanding who was involved, what factors were being considered, and what were the outcomes. To be more precise, I observed the spatial organization of the newsrooms, the power divisions among the journalists, and the affordances and usage of digital devices and software presented in the newsrooms, newsmaking routines, and practice guidelines (formal and informal). I have also witnessed conversations between journalists and editors, newsroom meetings (when access was granted), and other nonverbal communications. Notes were taken throughout the observation process and elaborated daily. They were then transcribed and saved in Word documents with password protection.

A main challenge for me was to find a way to understand the procedures and actions that took place "on the screen." Journalists usually spent long hours in front of their computers without interacting with anyone in the room. It is widely acknowledged that the working conditions of today's newsroom have changed greatly since the newsroom studies by first-wave researchers. The most noticeable difference is the significant presence of digital devices and software in newsrooms and the large amount of work that they accomplish. Boyer uses the term "informatic" to signal "the convergence of automaticity, intelligence, and knowledge in the context of electronic computation and digital information" (xviii). As more and more tasks are performed within computer systems, the amount of information accessible to the researcher has been both restricted and widened, as the information can be both hidden and overly abundant (Puijk 40).

In order to overcome this difficulty, I had preliminary discussions with the contact person in each newsroom to acquire some general knowledge of the digital platforms used there, for example, the content management system or the internal communication system. During my observation, I also asked journalists to explain the role these systems play in their daily work, for example, how it works in general and the tasks they have to perform. Familiarity with the computer system has necessarily facilitated my observations, gaining more insight into the practices that happen inside networks.

In addition, as the walls of newsrooms, “both physical and literal, are shifting dramatically,” the scale of the journalistic field under the scope of early ethnographic researchers has been broadened (Anderson, “Blowing Up the Newsroom” 187). Most notably, communication among journalists can take place on social network pages and in online chat groups in parallel to physical interactions in the newsroom. In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of their communication, I made an effort to expand the field of my observation into these virtual spaces. I followed several journalists on social networks and gained access to one of *Pengpai*’s working chat groups. For the other two newsrooms, where such access was not granted, the information was gathered during observations and interviews. For example, there were some occasions where online communication was involved, so I would take the opportunity to ask questions regarding the usage of these platforms. These interactions on social networks add another perspective to what is happening in the physical newsroom, as well as their personal opinions.

2. Semi-structured In-depth Interviews

In addition to newsroom observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews with journalists were conducted in order to go further into their understanding of daily practices and journalism. A biographical survey was carried out during the observation to recruit a group of participants with diverse profiles. The survey is valuable on its own, as it gives me a general idea of the newsroom staff. In total, 23 interviews between 45 minutes to one hour in length were conducted, with eight at *Pengpai*, eight at *The Kaiping News*, and seven at *The Yunnan Daily*. I selected a group of participants with diverse profiles that represented different divisions of the newsroom. At *Pengpai*, four participants were reporters while another four held managing positions; half were female. The participants at *The Kaiping News* have the same composition. *The Yunnan Daily* has significantly fewer staff. There, I interviewed five editors and another two participants in managing positions; six were female. In addition to formal interviews, I also had in-depth discussions with journalists that were mostly spontaneous following a specific event. Although these conversations were less structured, they were instrumental for understanding the underlying issues beyond the action that I observed.

A list of questions was prepared to guide the interviews, though for each interview the order and the actual wording may have varied. During the interview, I let the participants explore further as they deemed relevant, and I followed up new ideas that arose during the conversation by adding new questions. This approach helped me to cover the key topics of my research and retain control of the conversation while allowing space for exploration. While most of the interviews were recorded, sometimes the recorder was switched off due to the nature of certain content that might be considered sensitive (for example, their relationship with political censorship). In several cases where the relationship with the participants was delicate and my recording the conversation would compromise their confidence in me, written notes were used instead. In fact, I found that the journalists were more open to a discussion when it was not recorded, but the disadvantage was that I could only rely on my notes during the interviews and the additional remarks shortly after. All the interviews were transcribed, and the original audio files and transcripts are stored in password-protected files on my personal computer and external hard drive.

1.1.3. Concluding Remarks

Analysis of the three newsrooms relies on three sets of data. As I have stated in an exploratory study to this dissertation, interviews with the journalists bring in the professionals' own understandings and justifications of their daily practices and the profession, while newsroom observation puts me in concrete situations and allows me to form my own account of the actions and relationships. These two sets of data are complementary, as interviews help me understand the ideological considerations behind daily practices, while observation reveals the actual results of actions and sheds lights on more covert power relations as well as the journalists' mindsets beyond their conscious speech (Peters et al). In addition, studying news forms and online communication among journalists further enriches the data, illuminating their personal opinions and interactions in relation to newsmaking beyond the physical space of the newsroom. The findings generated by each approach are often corroborative, while in some cases the results contradict or refute each other. By making sense of all the information as a whole, a methodological triangulation is achieved, contributing to a more accurate interpretation of the findings.

Cottle suggests that while conducting newsroom observation, a researcher should adjust "his or her stance towards those encountered in the field; sometimes with the accent on 'participation,' sometimes on 'observation,' as the research proceeds and relationships develop through time" (5). In the case of this study, there are two weaknesses inherent to the researcher-as-full-participant approach in the newsroom. First, it is not realistic for a newsroom to assign any tasks to the researcher during such a short period of time. Second, previous experience shows that "full and complete observation of the journalists' routines cannot be done while performing certain tasks" (Serrano Vasquez 24). Journalistic work requires concentration. If I were to take on a certain task, I would not be able to stay alert to other newsroom activities. Therefore, I remained an observer during my time in the newsroom in order to develop a better account of the newsroom dynamics.

I also understand that proper distance is necessary in ethnographic research to avoid bias and blindness. I was educated in journalism and communication during my undergraduate and master's studies and have undertaken internships in Chinese media organizations. I worked as a lecturer in a journalism school for five years and closely followed the practices and discourses related to media both in China and beyond. My education and work experience grant me familiarity with media culture in China, including theories, skills, basic routines, professional vocabulary, and public discourses. These understandings helped me to quickly become familiar with each newsroom environment and carry out efficient communication with the journalists. However, I am not a journalist myself, so I am not overly close to the research object. Also, my absence from China over the past few years gave me a fresh eye with which to observe the situation.

However, I am aware of the brevity of the study design. It was difficult to gain access to the newsrooms because newsroom ethnography is not a widely known methodology in China's journalistic milieu, both academic and professional, and the current administration's tightening of control further added to the challenge. As a result, having a personal contact was an important factor in case selection. I am aware that there are significant differences among the three newsrooms that I studied in terms of their scale, economic situation, and target market. Nonetheless, the three news organizations shared certain similarities. They were all local newspapers facing similar challenges in today's shifting media climate: reaching online audiences, maintaining their

influence, and generating profit. Yet, in the course of moving online, they have all constructed different platforms and experimented with different strategies in reporting. In the following chapters, I will make sense of their newsmaking practices in the context of the local contingencies of each newsroom. The diversity among these three organizations underscores the fact that more than one form of journalism coexists in China, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the different ways that journalism is practiced in local digital newspapers in China during digitization.

1.5. Chapter Outline

This study belongs to the domain of the sociology of media production with ethnography as its main methodology. I began the introduction by reviewing the main issues of this field to position my research within the broader conversation about newsroom ethnography, its use in uncovering the changing face of journalism, and the need for cross-national discussions. This chapter went on to present my research questions as well as the methods involved in answering them. An introduction to the three newsrooms was also included. The Chinese media is unique because of the nation's political system. However, despite this variation in context, journalistic practices and journalists' professional ideology are constructed around values similar to those in the West. An investigation into the impact of digital technology on Chinese newspapers yields insights into how similar tools and values are incorporated under the Chinese media system.

The second chapter lays out the social and historical context of the Chinese media system as well as the way that Chinese newspapers engaged with digitization in the past. I highlight the coexistence of the liberal paradigm and party ideology within the Chinese system, and the way in which these two models shaped journalistic culture. These two forces shaped what I call the "double duality" of the Chinese system, meaning that party organs and commercial media coexist, and commercial organizations have to conform to market logic and the party line. Moreover, the party has updated its control mechanisms in light of the digital age's new media dynamics, sparking a reconfiguration of the Chinese media. The objective of this overview is to familiarize the audience with the social context and discourses around journalistic practices in China, laying the ground for a closer examination of the three newsrooms in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 offers a response to the first research question—how do newsmaking practices in China's digital newspapers shift in light of new technologies?—by presenting a holistic description of the dynamic at the three newsrooms and how they produce news. It shows how newsrooms reorganized themselves in terms of structure, personnel, and routine during the digital transition. A content analysis then further demonstrates to what extent the three emerging values of online news, which are immediacy, multimedia, and interactivity, were adopted in their production process. In general, this chapter paints a picture of three digital outlets that were still "We-Publish-You-Read" newspapers but were pursuing various initiatives to accommodate new forms of practice into their daily work.

Having documented the way the newsrooms operated and what kind of news was produced, the following two chapters move to explaining why. Chapter 4 responds to the second research

question, examining the societal and local forces that shaped the newsroom's innovation path. I focus on the effect of political forces, economic considerations, and organizational factors. However, while acknowledging constraints, I also highlight efforts made by journalists to explore the potential of digital technology. While local contingencies played key roles in determining the newsrooms' newsmaking practices, my study finds that shifting political-economic conditions for the media in China had a crucial impact on their path forward.

Chapter 5 focuses on the mindset of the journalists, exploring the principles and values behind their actions. I focus on three aspects of their professional ideology that were pertinent in light of changing practices: self-censorship, the way the journalists perceived their audience, and their efforts in defining their professional roles. My observations reveal that while working under growing political control, journalists in these three newsrooms pursued various paths away from the party line to establish their professional careers. Their practices largely focused on news forms, emphasizing the mastery of professional skills in the digital age.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, I back away from the particularities of each case and focus on the features shared among these three newsrooms. By examining these shifting media practices from a historical perspective, my study shows that the swing pattern that was first noticed during the time of media commercialization continued in the digital era. The strong political motivation to control the media combined with the media's pragmatic response to the changing field are two pertinent factors that affect media performance. My observation also revealed the concerning effect of the philosophy that "the economy prevails" on Chinese journalists. Because of political control and the lack of a coherent professional ideology, the current economic crisis has played a key role in affecting the mindset of Chinese journalists. The shifts I observed at the three newsrooms also indicate an interesting turn in the Chinese media system. With economic crisis looming, a new form of party organ, exemplified by *Pengpai*, is in formation. After discussing the limitations of the study, I conclude with my own contribution to the cross-national conversation by taking recent shifts in Western journalistic practice into consideration.

Chapter 2: Understanding the Media in China

Before analyzing the practices at the three newsrooms in this study, an introduction to the social and historical context is required. By mapping out the historical evolution of the Chinese media system, I would like to clarify certain misunderstandings about the media in China and give a more nuanced account of the social context within which Chinese media operate today. In the English-language scholarly literature, the analysis of “media and communication issues in China started as a subfield of the Cold War-conditioned area study branch known as sinology, with the United States as the core site of knowledge production” (Zhao, “China Media Colloquium” 574). The field later expanded to other English-speaking countries. Now, the leading scholars in this field are scattered across Europe (De Burgh; Meng; Svensson “Media and Civil Society”); North America (Curtin; Lei; Pan; Polumbaum and Lei; Zhao, *Communication in China*); Australia (C. Huang; Tong *Investigative Journalism in China*; Yu), Singapore (Li), and Hong Kong (Lee, *Crisscrossing*; Ma; Sparks, “Beyond Political Communication”) (Hong 93). Despite a diversity of disciplines and approaches, the majority of Chinese media studies have “a consistent tendency to prioritize political issues” (Sparks, “China’s Media” 561). The Chinese media system has been depicted as reflecting an authoritarian model of journalism without a thorough explanation of journalists’ beliefs or daily practices. The impact of the market and digital technology on Chinese media practices is often discussed in relation to the cultivation of freedom of speech and its evolution towards the more “ideal” liberal model of journalism. As Zhao points out, there is a clear “liberal democratization perspective” embedded in these discussions, meaning they view the opening of the communication market and technological evolution as a threat to the party’s authoritarian control and a facilitator of a liberal democratic order (*Communication in China* 143).

However, recent years have seen a growing number of publications in English by Chinese scholars that shed light on the ideological mechanisms that direct Chinese journalistic practices (D. Huang; He; Sparks et al. Wang and Sparks “Chinese Newspaper Groups”; Wang and Sparks, “Marketing Credibility”; Wang, “Generational Change”; Xiong and Zhang; Yin and Liu; Zhao, *Communication in China*). These studies unpack the belief system that guides the actions of Chinese journalists, including its historical and cultural roots and the influence of social domains beyond politics. Shaped by the evolution of Chinese society, media practices in China are complex and fluid, reflecting the different ideologies—Western liberal ideas and the authoritarian model—that coexist and compete with each other. While Western influence is no doubt present, it would be misleading to understand the Chinese media entirely from a Western-centric point of view. Therefore, this dissertation joins these recent studies in exploring a de-westernized understanding of the Chinese media.

There is no denying that the power structure in China is very different from the norm in most Western countries, and its control over Chinese media is unlikely to change any time soon. But to analyze the China case based entirely on a liberal journalistic paradigm is questionable in multiple ways. First, does the marketplace necessarily pave a straight road to free speech and democracy? Such expectations were raised when China began market reform and media commercialization. Digital technology arrived afterwards, with similar assumptions about its “inherently democratizing impact” (Zhao, *Communication in China* 144). Both arguments reflect a “liberal democratization perspective” by assuming that the Western liberal model is the only path forward.

In light of the emerging problem of “fake news” and shifting practices around it in the West, the supposedly positive impact of digital technology on journalism and the media system seems more obscure. Second, any given media system is deeply grounded in existing social power structures. As Couldry has questioned, could digital networks fundamentally change the long-term balance of institutional resources between social movements and more traditional political institutions (9)? Since economic liberalization has already failed to subvert the Chinese social power structure, what chance does new technology have? More crucially, is it time to question the assumption that the democratic model is the only viable future? As George argues, “it is timely to ask if this Anglo-America paradigm should be unseated from its current position of dominance, or if it remains the pre-eminent touchstone for journalism sub-cultures everywhere” (492).

This chapter examines the cultural roots of the Chinese model of journalism. By mapping out the historical evolution of the Chinese mechanism, I would like to clarify certain misunderstandings about media in China and give a more nuanced account of the social context within which Chinese media operate today. During a time when barriers are breaking down and boundaries are becoming blurry, it is crucial that we step outside the hegemonic framework and look into the diverse ways that journalism works around the world. Instead of putting the Chinese and Western models in a binary narrative, this chapter underlines the interconnections between these two paradigms within the Chinese media system.

2.1. The Democratic Core of Journalism and Western Bias

The conventional Western understanding of journalism is largely built on the movement towards professionalization that took place primarily in the United States in the twentieth century, which has since been the source of inspiration for journalists around the world. This normative model envisions a special relationship between journalism and democracy. It frames journalism as the Fourth Estate, an independent power to monitor government and corporate performance, and any variation is only considered legitimate if it embraces the same values (Hampton 3). Moreover, journalism exists in order to help sustain the public sphere and animate it, which points to an irreducible democratic core of the profession (George 493). These values were concretized into organizational structures and newsroom routines and practices as well as a set of practices of teaching, learning, and researching, which were later exported to other countries along with Western commodities (Deuze, “What Is Journalism?”; Nerone). Because of the long tradition of journalism studies in the West, the dominance of the English language in the literature, and the history of colonialism, this liberal model of journalism has taken center stage as a normative ideal in our understanding of journalistic practices worldwide, which shadows our understanding of media experiences from outside the Western world (Hallin and Mancini; Hanitzsch et al.; Nerone).

Thomas Hanitzsch lays out four broad paradigms in the development of comparative journalism studies: the US and the rest in the 1950s and 1960s, the North and the South in the 1970s, the West and the West from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, and the West and the globe in recent years (415). It was not until the 1990s that scholars started to move away from US-centrism towards a more diverse understanding of other Western countries and, later, journalistic cultures worldwide. Even today, as studies have grown more extensive and inclusive through the years with

scholars becoming increasingly conscious of the social contingencies that shape the media and journalistic practices in different social settings, Western bias remains one of the great concerns in these international studies. In general, this bias is manifested by presenting the liberal free press model as the ultimate standard for comparison or by relying on Western-born concepts in transnational research (Deuze, “What is Journalism”; Deuze and Witschge; George; Hanitzsch; Hanitzsch et al.; Nerone; Wasserman and De Beer; Zhao “For a Critical Study”).

Wasserman and De Beer identify this bias as an epistemological issue for the study of journalism, which deals with the origin and nature of knowledge about journalism and assumptions regarding its universality and generalizability. They argue,

A mere comparative study of how different dimensions of journalism are being understood or implemented around the world may be more inclusive, but would not necessarily de-Westernize the field. This is because the very categories within which such comparisons are made, are often deduced from concepts that have historically been central to Western, liberal-democratic normative notions of journalism, like objectivity, truth-telling and the need for a “free” press. The result is that “other” journalisms, be they African, Asian or Latin American, are then presented in terms of their correspondence with or deviation from established categories, with the normative category itself remaining unchanged even if deviance is not viewed negatively. (430)

Hanitzsch echoes this view by highlighting the need to develop concepts that deliberately serve a comparative purpose and extend beyond Western-grown models (424). Together, they argue that a global approach should not rest on simply analyzing non-Western countries using well-established Western analytic frameworks.

Multiple international research projects embarked on tackling this issue and have embraced a more diverse understanding of journalism, notably the studies led by Hallin and Mancini on media systems and a transnational survey of journalism culture conducted by an international team led by Hanitzsch. Hallin and Mancini first started their work *Comparing Media Systems* (2004) by focusing on 18 countries in North America and Western Europe that shared similar histories (the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) and then carefully applied the analytic framework beyond these Western countries in the following book *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World* (2012). Their studies address media diversity from a historical perspective, looking at the specific social conditions⁴ that shaped the media system in each country. Although they found evidence of convergence to a certain extent in the countries that they studied—even in China—they resist drawing any generalized conclusion about

⁴ They propose to use these four dimensions as a framework for comparison: the development of a media market, the development of journalistic professionalism, political parallelism, and the role of the state. The development of a media market refers to the historical roots of different cultures, and of economic and social development, which deeply affect the role of media in society and the relation between media and politics. Second, development of journalistic professionalism means to unpack and relativize different forms that were developed under various conditions. Political parallelism measures the extent to which the media is aligned with particular political orientations. The role of the state examines the power the political system has in shaping the media system (Hallin and Mancini, 287-296).

a global convergence and emphasize the idea that “the conceptualization of media systems needs to be rooted in detailed empirical analysis of particular systems in their own historical and structural context” (Hallin and Mancini 280). This last argument represents a crucial approach to understanding the media mechanism in different social settings both inside and outside the Western world, which is instrumental to this study as well.

Meanwhile, *Worlds of Journalism Study*, a cross-national inquiry conducted by a group of international scholars, explores journalism culture around the globe by framing journalism as a social institution that is discursively (re)created, (re)interpreted, appropriated, and contested (Hanitzsch et al. 306). The notion of journalism culture is analyzed in five dimensions—journalists’ perceived influences, roles, ethics, and trust as well as editorial autonomy—while taking socioeconomic conditions into account. By interviewing journalists in 67 countries, the study documents shared values and important differences among professionals and emphasizes different ways of interpreting and appropriating values and practices worldwide.

Despite their different approaches, both projects emphasize the social context that gives birth to the media system or journalism culture and highlight the constant renegotiation and contestation around them. They also address the delicate balancing work between abstract categorization and culture-specific descriptions and between normative ideologies and localized practices. As Hanitzsch and his colleagues explain, the multinational projects come with two seemingly antagonistic demands: “positing universal theoretical concepts that would be similarly understood in different cultural contexts and thus allow for meaningful comparison and providing culturally sensitive theoretical concepts that would enable sensible conclusion about the local conditions of journalism in societies around the world” (Hanitzsch et al. 24). They suggest moving away from culturally specific concepts and languages, such as the use of “monitor” instead of “watchdog.” However, they acknowledge that such an approach entails a substantially higher level of abstraction, which might override the differences that are deeply bound to the cultural context (288).

On the other hand, overemphasizing the contextual differences risks underestimating the effects of liberal ideologies. For example, Hallin and Mancini do notice a significant manifestation of forces that undermine contextual differences, such as diffusions of the Western press model, the growth of a global media market, democratization, and neoliberalism, all of which have transformed media systems in other parts of the world in important ways (287)—not to mention that the recent digital transformation might further contribute to the trend. Given the fact that the well-established journalism models are mostly Western in origin and our understanding about the normative liberal model is far more extensive than that of other “alternative models,” it would be overcorrecting to completely ignore Western ideology. George argues that there is an irreducible democratic core in people’s expectation of journalism across different cultures, which is that “journalism exists in order to help sustain the public sphere and animate it; it helps citizens arrive at judgments about the common good” (493). He supports the idea of a universally applicable normative definition of journalism with democratic values at its core. But beyond this core definition, principles and practices should be expected to differ substantially across political regimes (492). That is to say, while the liberal ideal might be a professional aspiration for journalists worldwide, the ways it is understood and practiced might differ. Some values might carry different meanings as a result of localization. As I will discuss at length in the following sections, the liberal and the authoritarian paradigms coexist in China. Some of the Chinese values, such as “Yu Lun Jian Du” (supervision of public opinion), derived from Western ideas (“watchdog”

in this case). But the actual practice of Yu Lun Jian Du has been adapted to the Chinese reality, imposing constraints on the journalist's watchdog power (D. Huang; Tong, *Investigative Journalism*; Zhao, *Communication in China*). Also, it is crucial to be aware that the notion of the "common good" can be interpreted differently in different cultures. As the survey of Hanitzsch et al. reveals, journalists from a collaborative culture display strong political trust and consider themselves to play an important role in promoting the country's development (296). That being said, while it is crucial to acknowledge the diversity of journalistic cultures around the world, it is equally important to acknowledge the influence of normative discourse. The key is to identify the traces of normative ideology and closely examine the localization of these universal ideas in each locale. As Zhao argues, "it will be illuminating not only to compare national media systems within the relative confines of national political economics and cultures, but also to study the dynamics of hybridization and contestation between different media systems and political cultures" ("Understanding China's Media" 173).

2.2. The Party Media Regime and Double Duality

As a crucial ideological tool, newspapers in China have been intertwined with the country's political struggles and social reforms from the beginning. Although it is widely believed in the West that the operation of media in China is guided entirely by party ideology, the liberal paradigm of journalism has coexisted with party journalism in different forms throughout the history of Chinese newspapers. As Guo argues, newspapers in China no longer follow an exclusively Communist model but, rather, a Chinese one with a mix of ideologies (60). Throughout Chinese history, there is a continuous "swing pattern" that parallels the changing social situation (Guo 55). That is to say, journalistic practices shift constantly between the liberal approach and the party model as information control policy changes.

2.2.1. The CCP and the Party Media Regime

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its struggles to take power in the twentieth century led to the development of its own media mechanism. In 1922, the CCP founded the first party weekly *Xiang Dao*⁵ (向导) in Shanghai, followed by several others including *Xin Qing Nian* (新青年) (quarterly⁶) and *Qian Feng* (前锋) (monthly⁷), to promote the ideology of Marxism-Leninism via editorials and opinion articles on current events (H. Huang 157-158). In Chinese

⁵ The weekly ran from September 1922 to July 1927 and has published 201 issues in total (H. Huang 157).

⁶ *Xin Qing Nian* was initially billed as a quarterly, but publication was in fact irregular with nine issues released in total between 1923 and 1926 (H. Huang 158).

⁷ Publication was in fact irregular; it ran from July 1923 to February 1924 with three issues in total (H. Huang 158).

journalism textbooks, the media is referred to as the mouthpiece of the party. The Maoist media system frames the masses as the embodiment of revolutionary ideals. Journalists should mobilize the masses within party-state apparatuses and remold them through a common ideology and absolute power under the party's command (Lee, "The Conception of Chinese Journalists" 114). Therefore, media are instruments through which the party can propagate the party line and policies (Pan 70). While the liberal-leaning newspapers had a wider readership among social elites in urban areas, the CCP rooted its own Maoist-journalism media system in the remote countryside to motivate the peasantry and lower middle class (H. Huang 165-218).

The "Rectification Movement" (also known as the Zheng Feng Movement) launched by the CCP in 1942 played a crucial role in shaping China's contemporary media system. In order to enforce party ideology, the CCP reformed *Jiefang Daily*, which was initially launched in May 1941 as the party's media organ and later became the exemplar for media organizations in China (Chen; D. Huang; H. Huang; Zhao, "Understanding China's Media"). Before the reform, *Jiefang Daily* was modeled as a metropolitan press, operating under the principle of "news first" and prioritizing international and national news (Chen 18). This approach was considered by the party's leadership to be out of touch with the social reality of the countryside and ineffective in promoting the party's policies. The new model, however, emphasizes the ideological nature of the party newspaper; it defines the press as a party mouthpiece intended to disseminate the "successful experience," meaning it exemplifies carrying out the party's policies (H. Huang 205).

These principles of proletarian journalism, as defined by the CCP, are well demonstrated in an article by Lu Dingyi, "Our Fundamental Views of Journalism" (我们对于新闻学的基本观点), published in *Jiefang Daily* in 1943: while acknowledging the function of news as reports of recent factual events and the utility of the 5W diagram, the article insists that the truthfulness of news can only be guaranteed by taking both facts and the ideological ground into consideration (H. Huang 207). Here the so-called ideological ground refers to whether or not the news presents the ultimate good as framed under the party's policies. Under Mao Zedong's "the party runs the press" initiative, Lu portrays the journalist as a public servant, responsible for serving and representing the people. The CCP, on the other hand, is the only organization of the people and represents their best interests. Therefore, journalists have to be in line with the CCP if they are to fulfill their duty.

This paradigm designated the CCP as the only viable choice to lead China out of the dark of wartime and appealed to the journalist's sense of patriotism. Under this paradigm, media should only be run by the CCP, and journalists should consider themselves members of the party and never hold opinions against it if they want to contribute to society (Fang 193). This claim that the CCP is equivalent to the public interest plays a fundamental role in legitimizing the party media regime and is reflected in numerous public campaigns.⁸ Although social circumstances have greatly changed, this principle is so deeply rooted in the collective conscious of the entire media system that it has become common sense until today (Zhao, *Communication in China* 25). The control of information and ideology is evident in the practice of self-censorship within media organizations at different levels—from individual journalists to executive editors, chief editors, and vice chiefs—

⁸ Such as the "harmonious Chinese society" in the 2000s, and the "Chinese dream" in the 2010s.

and guaranteed by post-publication control by the Information Office at each administrative level.

The Maoist system coexisted with the Western model until the founding of the New China in 1949. While enhancing the party media network, the CCP started a “socialistic reform of capitalism” at the commercial media organizations. As a result, more than half of the commercial newspapers ceased to operate, and the rest were gradually taken over by the CCP, initially as co-owner followed by ownership in full (H. Huang 2005). A party administrative structure⁹ was established within these organizations. Similar reforms have taken place in journalism schools with party media practitioners joining the faculty, and courses on proletarian journalism added to the curriculum. As a result, the party press network has developed substantially following the completion of socialistic reform in 1956. In 1957, there were 1,325 newspapers with a total circulation of nearly 2.5 billion; these numbers increased to 1,776 papers with 3.9 billion total circulation in 1958 (H. Huang 298). The Maoist media system has become the dominate paradigm of journalism in China.

Today, these party newspapers remain the major indicator of party policies and the authoritative voice during controversial events. In the case of major political events, national news organizations such as the *Xinhua News Agency* and the *People’s Daily* are the only reporting agencies, enforcing a unified propaganda line (Zhao, *Communication in China* 25). While the commercial newspapers have attracted the public with more market-oriented content since the late 1990s, the party organ’s political role remains crucial. Most recently, the digital transition has greatly weakened the commercial outlets in terms of circulation and advertising revenue, which has led to a new balance of power between the party organs and the commercial newspapers (Wang and Spark, “Chinese Newspaper Groups” 95). As the CCP explores different digitization strategies and new forms of news production in disseminating its policy, the idea of propaganda and what constitutes a party organ has been redefined.

2.2.2. Commercialization and the Liberal Journalistic Paradigm¹⁰

Contrary to popular belief about Chinese media, the CCP and its ideology are not the only forces that shape the media system in China. There have been two waves of a “commercialization revolution,” as Zhao (“Understanding China’s Media”) puts it, in the history of contemporary China, both inspired by Western liberal journalistic thinking. The first commercialization revolution started in the early twentieth century in China’s semi-colonial metropolitan cities, while the second took place across China during the economic boom following the Opening in the 1990s (Fang; H. Huang; Zhao “Understanding China’s Media”). Despite the commercial newspapers remaining under the tight control of the CCP, market and social forces have shifted the media

⁹ It runs in parallel with the usual administration with positions held only by party members and participates in day-to-day management by offering ideological guidance.

¹⁰ There were other periods in modern China when media experienced a relatively liberal period of development, for example, between 1949 and the 1957 Anti-Right Campaign (right refers to liberal in the Chinese context) and from 1978 to 1989 (Xu and Sun 1173-1176). However, these developments were not directly linked to media commercialization and are therefore not included here.

landscape in contemporary China.

1. Earlier Commercial Newspapers Inspired by the Western Model (1870-1949)

As was the case in other colonized countries, China's modern newspapers arrived with Western missionaries and commodities. It was through the Western-funded newspapers of the later nineteenth century that the principles of liberal journalism were introduced in China. One of the most influential newspapers at the time was *Sheng Bao* (申报), founded by English businessman Ernest Major in Shanghai in 1871. The paper prioritized factual news reporting, hired a Chinese chief editor, and offered wide coverage of social events, setting up a model upon which Chinese commercial newspapers were later developed (H. Huang 42-54). Tao Wang, a bourgeois reformist thinker, first articulated the function and responsibility of newspapers in a series he published in the 1870s. Inspired by the Western model, Wang conceived of newspapers as a channel between citizens and the emperor and insisted that freedom of speech should be guaranteed (H. Huang 61). Guided by his thoughts on journalism, the first Chinese newspaper *Zhao Wen Xin Bao* (昭文新报) was founded in the city of Hankou in 1873, followed by *Hui Bao* (汇报) in 1874, *Xin Bao* (新报) in 1876, and *Shu Bao* in 1884 (述报), among others.

The journalistic principles explored by these early experiments were further strengthened by Sun Yat-sen, who issued the *Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China* and established freedom of speech as the foundation of the Chinese media system in 1912 (H. Huang 103). His view, clearly influenced by the Western liberal model of journalism, was widely accepted at the time. However, governmental forces continually twisted his policy during political struggles in the following years, and the liberal paradigm of journalism was completely buried after the Second World War.

Nevertheless, the development of Chinese newspapers inspired by Western practices during this period facilitated the professionalization of journalism in China, which was marked by a shift in focus on facts and reporting skills and the emergence of popular journalists. Commercial newspapers gradually shifted away from political initiatives, adopting a more liberal-oriented approach towards reporting (H. Huang 115-117). There arose a wide range of mass-appeal newspapers modeled after the Western liberal tradition, including serious news-oriented broadsheets, entertainment and soft-news-oriented "evening papers" (afternoon tabloids), and the elite's intellectual papers (Zhao, "Understanding China's Media" 157). Around the same time, universities around China started to set up journalism departments as well as academic journals, often led by successful journalists or Western scholars, establishing a liberal-led tradition in communication studies in China. However, as De Burgh points out, "they are so taken by the thrill of imported ideas and new theories" that, in fact, "their ideas failed to be influential beyond their own social class" (199).

More importantly, being intertwined with the country's political struggles and social transformation during this period,¹¹ journalists were more concerned with political advocacy than

¹¹ From the late nineteenth century to the founding of the PRC in 1949 was a turbulent period for China. The nation saw the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the short-lived Republic of China led by progressives, two world wars, and a national war.

the Western approach, especially in the early stages (De Burgh; Lee, “The Conception of Chinese Journalists”; Lu and Pan; Zhao, “Understanding China’s Media”). Chin-Chuan Lee labeled Chinese journalists during this time “Confucian-liberal journalists.” Inspired by the Chinese “Wen Ren” (文人: literati), who had a long tradition of active participation in politics and aligning with the Western approach to journalism, these journalists considered themselves visionaries and reformists, aiming to enlighten the public with their articles (Lee, “The Conception of Chinese Journalists” 109-113) . In a similar vein, De Burgh argues that the rise of the journalist’s social status was associated with patriotic struggle, and the only political journalism was patriotic, change-oriented journalism (197). As Zhao concludes,

In short, to bring the Chinese media system into a worldwide comparative project necessitates a recognition of its Leninist and Maoist legacies in relation to the worldwide struggles against capitalism and Western imperialism and an understanding of ongoing struggles between different universalisms and different regimes of truth—politically, religiously, or culturally inspired—and how these struggles have shaped the transformation of media and politics. (“Understanding China’s Media” 150)

2. Commercialization in the 1990s and the Double Duality of the Media System

Another intense process of media commercialization started in the 1980s, and it accelerated after Deng Xiaoping’s call for further economic reform in 1992. As the priority of the country shifted from social revolution to economic development and some of the principles established in the revolutionary period that portrayed media as a tool of political battle were no longer compatible, the media in China moved away from Maoist ideology towards a “reform and open up” era (Zhao, “Understanding China’s Media” 149). In their search for an alternative Chinese model of journalism distinct from the Soviet model, the liberal model as well as Western communication theory remained an inspiration for Chinese media practitioners.

However, social conditions in China in the 1990s were different than in the West when the liberal model of journalism originated. The liberal culture of news that values balance, independency, and objectivity is grounded in the reconfiguration of social class and the formation of the public sphere and free market in Western countries in the nineteenth century (Nerone 448). Unlike in the West—where politics and the market have evolved relatively simultaneously—economic reform in China, of which media commercialization was a part of, took place only after the political structure was well established (Nerone; Zhao, “Understanding China’s Media”). Under the leadership of the CCP, media commercialization maintained the regime of a party press but at a smaller scale and recognized the rest of the media as economic organizations that had to operate under the rules of the free market. As a result, it established a “double duality” in the structure of the Chinese newspaper industry that consisted of:

- 1) the coexistence of party newspapers that followed propaganda orders with commercial newspapers that operated as commercial organizations, and
- 2) the operation of the commercial media under the delicate condition that media organizations function as economic entities that follow market logic while also partially taking on the role of party organ (Guo; Lei; Pan; Qian and Bandurski; Xu and Sun; Zhao, *Communication in China*).

As Guo explains, commercial newspapers in China operated, and still do today, within a particular dual-track system: they are enterprises that generate revenue but remain state-owned, functioning as a part of the nation's ideological propaganda mechanism (50). Led by political initiatives while trying to integrate into the market, their development demonstrated a "continuous swing pattern," as Guo puts it, ruled and stimulated by numerous political campaigns (55).

It is also necessary to point out that the focus of CCP-led media commercialization¹² is to reduce the government's financial burden rather than restructure the media system (Pan 71). As part of the reconfiguration of the country's economic system, commercialization arrived as a top-down initiative without clear instructions, and each media organization had to explore and experiment on its own (Pan 78). More critically, most media managers were former party officials or journalists, meaning they lacked the necessary knowledge of the market and management techniques. The idea of a commercial newspaper, as well as the way one operates, was new and vague, and the path forward was unclear. Under these circumstances, it is fair to say that media organizations were most concerned with their financial viability, and the actions they took were those deemed "doable and [which] may help accomplish some immediate goals in a narrowly specified situation" (Pan 79). As a result, for a long time after the Great Opening, reforms in China's newspaper industry focused only on areas such as advertising and circulation or internal management and financial adjustments without any fundamental reform in journalistic practices (Guo 56). The rush to boost revenues contributed to a sense of "the economy prevails" in the industry, which was consistent with the mantra of the Great Opening and reflects the general spirit of Chinese society in the 1990s. As Lee points out, the media enjoyed greater "negative freedom" after marketization, both chipping away at state control and ushering in an increasing supremacy for commercial logic ("The Conception of Chinese Journalists" 120). One of the implications was that the boundary between the commercial and editorial spheres was never clearly defined in the process of commercialization, and the values of journalistic impartiality and independence were partly recognized but not well-established (Wang and Sparks, "Marketing Credibility" 1303). As demonstrated later in this dissertation, the unconditioned pursuit of economic success had far-reaching effects on news productions, particularly when an economic crisis hit in the wake of the rise of online media.

Nevertheless, as the priority of the CCP moved from political revolution to economic development, the power of social and market forces in shaping news culture started to grow. Substantial discussions regarding the nature of journalism and the way it functions in modern society took place; these were still grounded in Maoist revolutionary hegemony while also bringing in elements of the Western model (Guo; H. Huang; Tong, *Investigative Journalism*; Zhao, "Understanding China's Media"). For example, the newspaper was considered to be foremost a tool to guide public opinion, but its cultural and economic features were acknowledged. Meanwhile, Western communication theories were introduced to practitioners and integrated into their daily practices (Lu and Pan 22). What's more, although the prestige conferred by the market did not give

¹² Media commercialization happened in the context of a larger economic reform in China aimed at reducing the government's skyrocketing budget deficit. Together with other entities that were operating under the command system, media organizations saw their state subsidies significantly reduced without losing their state-owned status. This approach is known as "shiyue danwei qiye guanli," meaning the public unites under business management (see Pan).

them political autonomy from the CPC, it did provide a significant counterweight, at least against pressure from lower levels of the party (Wang and Sparks, “Chinese Newspaper Groups” 102). As a result, the development of newspapers unfolded within a scope determined by the party line (dominant ideology) and the bottom line (social and market forces), as Yuezhi Zhao’s (*Communication in China*) famous characterization puts it. Media in China shifted away from a model of “control” towards a model of “negotiation” over boundaries (C. Huang 403).

2.3. The Internet and Newspaper Digitization

While trying to explain China’s unusual media system, Yuezhi Zhao, one of the leading scholars in Chinese media studies, points to “China’s compressed hypermodernity” as an important feature, referring to the fact that the era of China’s hyper-modernist, post-Mao development condensed hundreds of years of development in the West (“Understanding China’s Media” 155). One example that demonstrates the speed at which Chinese society is evolving is the arrival of the digital revolution immediately after the launch of media commercialization. While media organizations were still grappling with finding their way through the commercial revolution in the 1990s, the advent of digital technology emerged as a new force that once again shook the media landscape.

The new online platforms provided an alternative channel to the established state-controlled media system, contesting the legitimacy and credibility of the conventional media. Most importantly, they threatened print newspapers’ core business, which was still in its infancy. What’s more, an online leftist community emerged in China’s cyberspace, which was vocal in discussing social issues in the early days of social media¹³ (Zhao, *Communication in China* 280). Both party and commercial newspapers faced a new challenge: to reinvent themselves in terms of news product and business model and to regain their public influence in light of new technologies.

It is within this complex reality that newspapers in China adopted digital technologies, marked by the launch of *China Daily*’s website in 1995. Newspapers, driven by the need to maintain their influence and economic sustainability, pursued various initiatives. The course of the digitization of newspapers over the past twenty years can be divided into three phases (Peter et al. 499), each marked by a breakthrough in communication technology and accompanied by a shift in economic situation and a renegotiation in the power relations among news organizations, the public, and state control.

¹³ The traditional censorship mechanism only applied to traditional media content. In the early days of social media, the mechanism hadn’t caught up yet, and a window to public participation in online discussion was opened in 2009 and 2010.

2.3.1. Stall: Websites and the Codependent Relationship with Social Media

Accomplishing two reforms—commercialization and digitization—at the same time is almost impossible. To cope with the pressure, the digitization of the Chinese media took place at a much slower speed than in most Western countries. It is fair to say that no substantial change in newspapers’ core practices was generated until 2012. From the arrival of the internet in China in 1994 until 2012 when substantial reform started to take place, Chinese newspapers developed two main digitization strategies as a means of stalling rather than reforming. Newspapers would add new elements on top of their production—such as a website, social media accounts, etc.—but they didn’t make any substantial changes to their newsmaking practices.

This first stage is marked by a booming economy and showcase websites that lasted from the 1990s until the emergence of social media in 2009. Soon after the arrival of the internet in China, there was a common sense that the traditional media should make use of this new medium to disseminate news. Newspapers experimented with different digitization strategies, such as sending news content to users via email, using SMS services to deliver news (手机报, mobile press), and hosting online forums. Eventually, the option that attracted the most expectations and funding was establishing an online presence through a website. For a long period after the appearance of the first newspaper website in 1995, “to build a website” was considered to be a grand gesture towards “embracing the future,” without thinking more deeply about what websites meant to newspaper practices. In 2010, China reported 1,939 newspapers and each had their own website or cooperated with other organizations on a shared site (F. Fang). However, most websites displayed few differences in format and content from the print newspaper. Most journalists considered the website to be an insignificant accessory that needed to be subsidized by print revenue. By the time I started my research, the websites built during this time had been totally abandoned by all three news organizations.

In the second stage from 2009 to 2013, the rapid growth of social media platforms, such as Sina Weibo in 2009 and WeChat in 2011, combined with the popularization of smart phones brought about an explosion of public expression and the emergence of a vocal online community,¹⁴ which forced newspapers to adopt new digital strategies. Given the rapid growth in active users and the volume of information that was circulated online, newspapers saw an immediate need to extend their voices on those platforms in order to maintain their public influence. Nearly every newspaper created an account on major social media, and journalists were among the early adopters of those platforms. Some of them have become opinion leaders in cyberspace through their active participation in online discussions about current events and social issues. More importantly, these platforms evolved so rapidly that the state control mechanism had yet to catch up, providing an opening for media practices that were outside the party-directed range (Lei; Svensson, “Media and Civil Society”; Zhao, “Understanding China’s Media”). Newspapers engaged in public discussions online by re-posting from activists and following up on social events. Social media became an alternative platform to disseminate news that newspapers could not run because of the absence of

¹⁴ An online public sphere had emerged in China before the advent of Weibo in 2009; online forums were the most important venue for citizens to discuss news (Lei 117). See also Zhao, *Communication in China*.

regulations regarding social media use at that time and the speed with which information circulated online.¹⁵ The bureaucratic system of censorship was incompatible with the efficacy of social media until 2013 (when the measures targeting social media were tightened dramatically). When an administrative order arrived, the newspaper would delete the offending content and apologize, but the impact was already made. This was a market strategy to promote circulation without touching any core practices of print newspapers as well as a professional move to test the press censor's limits and act outside of political constraints (C. Huang 406).

It is fair to say that no substantial change to newspapers' core practices had occurred by then, partially because the internet had not presented any serious threat to the print business at this point (Sparks et al. 187). From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, commercial newspapers in China experienced a golden age with newspapers' revenues thriving and journalists' incomes rising (Pan; Sparks et al.). The nation's rapidly growing economy provided a highly profitable advertising market. As a result, contrary to most newspapers in Western countries that started to experience a sharp decrease in advertising revenue as early as 2007, newspapers in China remained in a comfortable economic situation until 2013. According to the statistics released by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of P. R. China (SAPPRFT),¹⁶ the yearly profit of the newspaper industry continued to grow by 43.2% in 2010 and remained stable in the following years. Given the fact that print outlets' revenues were on the rise and the lack of a sustainable economic model for news websites, newspapers were not motivated to move online more aggressively, and therefore their digital initiatives were less experimental.

The tight control the state administered over the production of news was another factor. According to state policy, websites could not carry original news content unless a special license was issued, which remains in the state's grip. Consequently, newspapers' websites had no choice but to rely on their parent newspaper for content, and private-run news portals such as *Sina* and *Sohu* were no competition for conventional media without original content. Similarly, social media remained dependent on the traditional media for credible content because only legitimate journalists were allowed to conduct interviews and investigations. In other words, there was much more space to publish than there was available content. As a result, there was a high level of homogenization of news content across different news websites and social media accounts (Lei; Yang). What's more, given the significant digital gap across China, access to social media was very much limited to social elites, and the print newspaper was still a crucial tool to achieve broader social influence. As a result, newspapers and social media formed an interdependent, rather than competitive, relationship (Lei).

¹⁵ The phenomenon of *Wei Guan* (围观), meaning the gathering of a virtual crowd on Chinese social media to discuss public outcry and popular sentiment around controversial issues, was key for media to break barriers. The momentum of high volumes of online traffic (reading, sharing, reposting) tends to form a sort of networked power and group pressure for the government to respond (see Xu and Sun 1183). Some significant events include the Shanghai Jin'an fire in 2010 and the Wenzhou train collision in 2011. See also: Tong, "Technology and Journalism: 'Dissolving' Social Media Content into Disaster Reporting on Three Chinese Disasters".

¹⁶ Retrieved from: <http://www.sapprft.gov.cn/sapprft/govpublic/6649.shtml>

2.3.2. The Real Convergence: A Reaction to the Crisis

The situation changed dramatically around 2013.¹⁷ SAPPRT recorded a 12.4% profit loss in the newspaper industry in 2014, and the decline continued. By the end of 2016, there were 1,894 newspapers in China with a total circulation of 39 billion, down 20% from its peak while the press industry's yearly net revenue dropped 70% to 3.01 billion RMB. Provincial and municipal newspapers experienced a more significant decline than their national counterparts. Meanwhile, the number of newspaper journalists dropped by 12,000 between 2005 and 2015 (L. Li). More critically, while print media were losing their share, the newspapers' online business was not bringing in any profit. To borrow Yin and Liu's words, "the profit model of innovative convergence business by many (Chinese) media is not clear, and much new business is still at the phase of 'burning money'" (564). Facing economic crisis, newspapers were forced to rethink their online strategies.

Another reason for this turn lies in the growing willingness of the Chinese authority to regain control of cyberspace. The interdependence of new and old media attracted greater attention from Chinese authorities (D. Huang 114). Stricter control began to be applied to online communication in 2011 and was dramatically tightened in 2013. Cyberspace was deemed to be a new ideological battleground over which the party sought to take control (Yin and Liu 563). To achieve this goal, the state authority mobilized traditional media to increase their online voice by undertaking profound digitization reforms, namely media convergence, so they could profit from the professional skills of the media as well as the established mechanisms of control inside these organizations.

The media's efforts towards digitization, at this stage, were both a spontaneous response to the threat new media presented to their core print business and a result of political mobilization. For the first time, digitization became an urgent necessity for newspapers in China, and they began to systematically consider what this change of medium meant for their organizational structures, technological networks, economic models, and professional practices. It is in this conjuncture of media-market-state-social negotiation that the digitization of newspapers entered into a more complicated phase of media convergence that involves social, political, economic, and professional initiatives (Wang and Sparks, "Chinese Newspaper Groups"; Wang and Sparks, "Marketing Credibility"; Yin and Liu; Zhao, *Communication in China*).

The newspaper industry faced two main challenges: a weak market and firm control. As Yin and Liu point out, digitization is not only complicated but also costly (564). It is true that the economic crisis for online news production is universal, and an effective way to restore income for online news is yet to be found. But for China's newspapers, which had just gone through economic reforms and were still young and inexperienced in the business, it was even more challenging to undertake fundamental changes on their own. More critically, although Chinese newspapers experienced the economic shock later than their Western counterparts, the loss was concentrated over a much shorter time span and was therefore more difficult to mitigate (Wang and Sparks,

¹⁷ The decline did not happen simultaneously in all Chinese cities. Advertising revenue for newspapers in Shanghai (where *Pengpai* is located) had already seen a slight decrease starting in 2011.

“Chinese Newspaper Groups” 100). Thus far, governmental funding has returned to the field and played an instrumental role in the case of a few successful organizations (for example, *Pengpai*). That indicates an interesting turn in the role of capital. The arrival of market capital in the 1990s opened up the media industry in China; the re-entry of state funding releases the constraints on media imposed by capital during digitization but limits independence in return.

Secondly, the economic crisis was met by the state’s desire to regain control over online information, further complicating newspapers’ digital endeavours. Chinese newspapers have always had an ambivalent relationship with the authorities. The organizations needed official support, both economically and politically, to ensure their legitimacy and accomplish challenging tasks like media convergence. But at the same time, as the control of information has become increasingly challenging in the context of accelerated economic reforms, global reintegration, and digital communication, the CCP needed the conventional media as it continually adjusted their control mechanism. This fact led to another renegotiation of powers in news production. On the one hand, the CCP propelled the digitization of the conventional media by granting more freedom in the beginning, so it could benefit from the established media system and extend its voice online. On the other hand, some liberal-minded Chinese journalists were eager to take advantage of this transition to negotiate autonomy in newsmaking. However, this opening proved limited and temporary. The CCP increased censorship by employing new techniques when the media’s actions threatened the bottom line. As Yin and Liu point out,

Neither the state nor the media has a dominant position in the dynamics of the relationship between continuity and change but engage in constant negotiations and tactical contests. The state, while maintaining control of the media in terms of both politics and ideology, has had to adapt its policies to the changing international and media environment, and permitted the negative freedom of the media to be broadened (565).

Again, we see the same swing pattern that occurred during commercialization. Newspapers enjoyed more advantages at the beginning but soon encountered stricter control under China’s shift towards “hard authoritarianism” (Wang and Sparks, “Chinese Newspaper Groups” 99). The strong motivations of the authorities, the critical economic situation of newspapers, the active online community, and journalists’ growing sense of professionalism—all these different social powers negotiate constantly as media convergence unfolds (Peter et al. 508).

2.4. Understanding the News in China

There is a growing awareness among scholars that journalism is transitioning from a more or less coherent profession to a highly varied and diverse range of practices (Deuze and Witschge 166) (see also George; Hallin and Mancini; Zhao, “Understanding China’s Media”). George insists on the possibility of a universally applicable normative definition of journalism with democracy at its core (492), while Deuze and Witschge warn that the core is no more homogeneous than the periphery (168). To achieve a more nuanced understanding of the state of contemporary journalism, a closer look at the Chinese media system will be beneficial. Although the media in China remains state-controlled, commercialization and digitization are shifting the culture of news in China. It

would be a mistake to assume that the way journalism is practiced in China is totally different from the normative model, but it is equally wrong to suggest that the liberal approach is the definite future. One crucial point to make is that the Chinese system is not a clearly defined and fixed model, but a constantly evolving one that resists the liberal ideal (Guo; Pan; Sparks, “Beyond Political Communication”; Wang and Sparks, “Marketing Credibility”). Entangled with the state, the market, and the public, the Chinese media system is constantly adapting to social transformations. As Hallin and Mancini remark after comparing media systems within and beyond the West, “Political and media institutions, moreover, are indeed constituted and changed by particular actors and cannot be taken as pre-existing or fixed” (302). More importantly, different ways to practice journalism exist even within China. As Sparks argues, “it is surely time to recognise a plurality of strategies amongst Chinese media organisations and a plurality of journalisms, rather than one single model” (“Beyond Political Communication” 62).

2.4.1. An Opening for Critical Reporting

One significant change in Chinese newspapers’ news production is a diversification of practices beyond party propaganda. As argued previously, the arrival of capital in the media field in China brought a flourishing of media production, as commercial newspapers explored alternative editorial strategies outside party ideology, providing more diverse and consumer-oriented content (Guo; Lei; Tong, *Investigative Journalism*, Xu and Sun; Zhao, “Understanding China’s Media”). Despite the limited scale, these practices were evidence that spaces were opening up for forms of journalism other than the party paradigm. As Wang and Sparks summarize,

Up until now, however, no one has questioned that the development of the market in China has led to increased openings for journalists, working mostly but not exclusively in the commercial titles, who have been able to develop new forms of journalism and even to produce some mildly critical material on carefully selected topics. It is incontrovertible that the evidence demonstrates that, in the circumstances prevailing in China, the market has had a positive effect on journalism and that the state is an obstacle to the press helping generate a version of the public sphere. (“Chinese Newspaper Groups” 98)

Notably, driven by the need to increase circulation and profit, commercial newspapers have therefore adopted different reporting strategies including critical reporting and investigative journalism (C. Huang; Sun; Svensson, “Media and Civil Society”; Tong, *Investigative Journalism*; Tong and Sparks; Xu and Sun). A handful of newspapers, such as *Nanfang Weekend*, *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, and *Dahe Daily*, have had great commercial success by reporting on social wrongdoings and government corruption, while building up a reputation of professionalism and credibility among public and peers. As Guo argues, commercial newspapers and their journalists have emerged as a kind of social power, exerting more influence over social and political fields via public comments (48). As a result, there is a news gap between party and commercial media that leads to a corresponding divide in public trust and credibility, which has direct implications for the CCP’s ability to shape public opinion (Qian and Bandurski 44).

This shift towards professional journalism represents a radical turn from party ideology and

has thus become the focus of multiple studies (D. Huang; Sullivan; Svensson, “Media and Civil Society”; Tong and Sparks; Wang, “How Big Is the Cage”; Yin and Liu; Yuan; Zhao, *Communication in China*; Zhou et al.). In general, the question of whether China’s media reforms will necessarily lead to a democratic future remains a central framing device, but the answers proposed by these scholars are often uncertain, complex, or even negative (Zhao, “China Media Colloquium” 577). Despite the overall pessimism, an opening towards critical reporting is acknowledged. Studies focusing on investigative journalists argue that, despite the small scale, their practices demonstrate that journalists in China still enjoy a certain degree of freedom. More importantly, the practice of investigative journalism, which emphasizes the media’s check-and-balance power, had positive effects on Chinese journalists’ sense of professionalism. Tong and Sparks argue that investigative journalism has been institutionalized in the life of Chinese media, assisted by tactics and the internet, and has come to occupy a central place in Chinese journalists’ self-identifications (341).

The advent of digital technologies had similar effects. Some scholars have recently claimed that the emerging online community opened new space for free speech and public opinion. For example, Yuan argues that in a new participatory model, commercial newspapers collaborate with urban, civic-minded online users to create alternative news discourse (78). In a similar vein, Svensson (“Media and Civil Society”) demonstrates that the interactions between the community of investigative journalists and other groups in society via digital platforms have fostered a civil society in China. Sun summarizes: “the different interests and goals of central and local government and media institutions, and the dynamic restructuring of power and interests in a society undergoing dramatic transformation create significant space for public opinion supervision in contemporary China” (43).

However, other scholars remain skeptical about any fundamental changes in the media-state relationship because the state maintains power in determining media autonomy (Guo; D. Huang; Sparks, “Beyond Political Communication”; Zhao, *Communication in China*). Investigative journalists have to deploy “guerrilla tactics,” as Tong puts it, as they carefully navigate between the party line and the bottom line. Liberal-oriented newspapers constantly face crackdowns from the top, and the party newspapers remain a unified voice during political events. As Huang Dan argues, “at most, the media might come to occupy a ‘third realm’ between the state and civil society, a social space in which both the state and the civil society participate” (D. Huang 114). More critically, as the commercial media continues to face financial difficulties in the digital era, the party press is resurging, imposing new threats on critical and independent journalism (Wang and Sparks, “Chinese Newspaper Groups” 94). It is fair to say that critical reporting, as it is known in the West, was never routinized into the media’s daily practices, and its existence in China is largely subject to the media organizations’ financial situation and the party’s reigning policies.

2.4.2. The Growing Sense of Professionalism among Journalists

Along with the emergence of critical reporting in China, there is also evidence that Chinese journalists’ perceptions of their profession are shifting in the wake of the commercial and digital reforms. Studies show that the liberalized economy and the participatory internet have generated a

powerful force that stimulated a sense of professionalism among journalists in China (Guo; Lei; Pan and Chan; Tong and Sparks; Wang, “Generational Change”). Tong and Sparks see an evolution towards a self-conception of journalism as a form of public service, which is aligned with Western conceptions of journalistic professionalism (340). Pan and Chan echo this view by showing that China’s journalists in general tend to view professional news media as more desirable than party organs in relation to their professional ideals (670). Hassid also demonstrates that some journalists in China identify themselves as “American-style” professionals. However, some of these Western-inspired Chinese journalists tend to engage in more direct forms of advocacy than the traditional “American-style professionals, as they often try to push a specific social, ideological, or economic viewpoint” (Hassid 829).

However, these studies also reveal evidence of different ideologies among Chinese practitioners. Their approaches to categorization vary, but they all acknowledge two competing journalistic paradigms in forming Chinese journalists’ self-identities. One frames media as party-organs that function as a part of the political system; the other is the liberal model represented by professionals in the Western media such as the *New York Times*. The coexistence of these two paradigms in journalists’ self-perceptions “reflects the tension between media marketization and party’s ideological control” (Pan and Chan 671). The difference between the two paradigms is also manifested in journalists’ daily practices. As Bifeng Rui demonstrates, a duality among China’s media and journalists followed the introduction of social media: they practice what has been called “party journalism” on mainstream platforms, while publishing totally different content on social media, which contributes greatly to public opinion online (20). When online pressure about certain issues builds up, they pick up the topic and publish a story in the mainstream press.

In fact, this is not the first time that a sense of professionalism has emerged among Chinese journalists. Similar sentiments can be found among news practitioners during the first commercial revolution in the early twentieth century. Scholars also remind us of the Chinese tradition of public intellectuals articulating society’s conscience, which could also contribute to the growing sense of professionalism (Tong and Sparks 340) (see also: Lee, “The Conception of Chinese Journalists”; Lee, *Crisscrossing*; Tong and Sparks). I would add China’s westernized education in journalism and communication as a contributing factor. In the Chinese education system, journalism is an imported discipline. It first started under the discipline of Chinese language studies, often led by Western scholars or Chinese intellectuals who had studied abroad. The first School of Journalism in China was established in cooperation with the Missouri School, which greatly influenced journalism education in China (Lee, *Crisscrossing*; Xu). In contrast, the CCP’s media regime emerged from grassroots political revolution with rules and regulations less clearly defined. Although the party made efforts to theorize the ruling ideologies, Western communication theories still dominate the curriculum at journalism schools (Z. Zhang). As a result, there is a clear ideological gap between what is taught at school and what is practiced in reality,¹⁸ which also

¹⁸ Being able to determine what is too sensitive to report is part of “news sense” for Chinese journalists. It is mostly passed on from senior members of the newsrooms and learned from experience. To speak from personal experience, I was told to “forget about your journalism dream” at the start of my internship, and this experience was shared by many of my peers.

contributes to differences in journalists' self-perceptions.¹⁹ But it is equally important to point out that the CCP has been trying to close that gap by adding more courses that reflect party ideology, providing funds to encourage research and publications along the party line, and promoting cooperation between propaganda departments and journalism schools (Xu). As addressed in the following section, these actions are part of a larger effort to theorize the ruling ideologies of the CCP (Zhao, *Communication in China*).

2.4.3. The CCP's Updated Media Mechanism

In order to better understand the confusing and unique media system and journalistic practices in China, it is crucial to look at the social reality of the country as a whole. The development of the media system in China was part of a country-wide reform that took place across different industries. The goal was to build a "socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics," as coined by Deng Xiaoping (Lee, "The Conception of Chinese Journalists" 108). Because of its particularity, there was little experience to learn from in reaching this goal. To use Deng's famous motto, one needs to "cross the river by feeling the stones" (摸着石头过河). That is to say, every institution needed to improvise as the reforms moved forward, including the CCP and its governing ideology (Guo; Pan; Sparks, "Beyond Political Communication"; Zhao, "Understanding Chinese Media"). It is fair to say that neither the media nor the state had a clear plan for the path forward. Instead, it was a trial-and-error process for the media organizations that tried to adapt to the market and to new technologies as well as for the state that searched for new mechanisms to maintain control. As Pan argues, the need to explore unknown territories was felt at all levels of an organization (81). It is crucial to recognize that the rules for propaganda are never written and fixed; instead, it is unpredictable and shift constantly as the party evaluates each situation (Lee, "The Conception of Chinese Journalists"; Tong, "Guerrilla Tactics"; Wang, "How Big Is the Cage?"; Zhao, *Communication in China*). Journalists have to draw on personal experience in their decision making and constantly adjust their standards. As a result, media practice in China advances in a swing pattern as the space of freedom widens and closes over time, largely depending on the ruling style and ideology of the people in power (Guo).

Faced with the fact that the market and the internet created a liberal shift in the Chinese media system, the CCP has constantly expanded and upgraded its media control while most departments and offices were downsized as a part of the political reforms after the big Opening (Zhao, *Communication in China* 22). However, the way that state power is exercised over media practices has shifted as the party control mechanism adapted to the new media landscape. In terms of administrative control, the CCP has strengthened licensing for news production, leadership control, and post-publication monitoring while adding new bureaus and developing new tactics to control information online. One significant move was establishing the Cyberspace Administration in 2011.

¹⁹ Dealing with the rules and limits of the party is also an important "news sense" for Chinese journalists, which they learn from their own experience and that of their peers as well. In practice, journalists have to pass an exam which is heavily focused on party ideology in order to obtain a press card. There are also annual training sessions, frequent messages, and meetings to pass on the party's latest notice.

The bureau has issued a series of regulations regarding the use of the internet, especially social media platforms, to disseminate information. In 2013, the internet was deemed a critical site for social stability, ideological struggle, and national security in China by President Xi in his key address (Lei 173). In the following year, aiming at the growing popularity of WeChat, the office broadly tightened the supervision of individual use of instant messaging applications, marking a critical turn for the CCP's media control policy. The regulation, widely known as the "Ten Regulations for WeChat" (微信十条), was a sign that the CCP was ready to break the long time interdependent relationship between the commercial newspapers and social media. On the one hand, licensed media organizations became the only agent authorized to disseminate political news and are held responsible for any information that is not aligned with the propaganda discipline. On the other hand, the regulation mandates identity verification for all social media users and charges the social media companies with the responsibility of censoring the information circulating on their platforms, signifying a decentralization of control in the media regime, as Zhao puts it (*Communication in China* 33). This strategy enlists the private sector's highly efficient technology and increasingly powerful social media moguls into its service (Lei 181). In addition, the rise of big data science has led to the emergence of an industry consisting of media organizations, universities, and private companies that provides general and customized public opinion reports to party-state agencies at various levels as well as business actors (Lei 177). As a result, the CCP extended its power beyond the government offices, turning telecommunication carriers, internet service providers, as well as scientists and academia into content controllers (Lei; Zhao, *Communication in China*).

While controlling information on social media, the CCP also urged the traditional media to move online to "occupy the commanding height,"²⁰ which became another mission of the Cyberspace Administration: to facilitate the digitization of conventional media. The office provided policy guidance, financial support, as well as political backup for the media's digitization projects. *Pengpai*, one of the media organizations studied in this dissertation, is one of the examples. This move reveals a shift in the CCP's ruling ideology. Instead of seeking total control of information, the party now aims for effective domination (Zhao, *Communication in China* 35). As Zhao explains, the party's ruling strategy has shifted away from suppression and public critique of oppositional voices to maximizing the influence of the party agenda by ensuring the hegemonic position of the state-owned media online. She calls this strategy "cold treatment": the party ignores publicly stated problematic messages while prohibiting further dissemination as a tactic to minimize their influence (*ibid*). In a similar vein, Lei highlights the state's efforts to "turn the gray zone red," meaning to cultivate voices to compete with the so-called "black groups" (critics) to boost the Chinese state's popularity among the general public (194). The approaches include setting up numerous Weibo and WeChat public accounts to amplify positive energy online, recruiting "cyber-civilization volunteers," and more (194-196).

At the same time, the CCP has accelerated theorizing its ruling ideology, legitimizing its control into a "Chinese communication theory" (Zhao, *Communication in China*). As mentioned earlier, journalistic education in China was largely dominated by Western handbooks, creating a

²⁰ This expression comes from Xi Jinping's speech at the National Communication Conference in 2013. It has become a key slogan for media digitization ever since.

gap between party practice and liberal theories. In an effort to close the gap, the CCP has adopted a two-way approach. On one end, each leadership regime in the post-Mao era has made an effort towards constructing the concept of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”²¹ (Guo; Zhao, *Communication in China*). New concepts and principles have been invented as a theoretical justification for the leader’s ruling mechanism, including Deng Xiaoping’s “development is a hard truth” (发展才是硬道理), Jiang Zeming’s “three represents theory” (三个代表), the “scientific view of development” (科学发展观) by Hu Jintao, and the most recent “Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (新时代中国特色社会主义思想) from Xi Jinping, just to name a few. It is true that efforts to contain the contentious public sphere in order to maintain social stability were consistent throughout the history of PRC. However, the Hu-Wen leadership was relatively liberal in some respects, for example, the use of language such as “right to know, right to participate, right to express, and right to oversee the government” in National Congress (Lei, 171-174). Meanwhile, President Xi’s policy is widely seen as a turn to hard authoritarianism, launching another push to establish a Chinese model. Zhao underlines the importance of these doctrines in rationalizing the CCP’s ideology. As she argues, these articulated expressions “set the basic terms for the party’s ideological hegemony and thus serve as symbolic resources for social contestation” (*Communication in China*, 39).

In terms of media control, these concepts are essential in legitimizing the party’s control, establishing a link between national patriotism and the party’s propaganda line and aligning CCP rule with economic development, social harmony, and advancement as well as other public interests. Terms and concepts are created in an effort to rationalize ideological control and normalize the media’s status as party organ without contradicting the liberal paradigm. For example, a key notion is “criticism and self-criticism,” which originated in the party’s socialization movement in the 1950s with media seen as the most effective weapon (D. Huang 108). The practice of criticism and self-criticism then turned into a Chinese journalistic concept: Yu Lun Jian Du (舆论监督), meaning supervising government power via public opinion. . On the outside, this concept mimics the watchdog role of Western media; however, while the Western notion emphasizes the independence of the media, the Chinese concept signifies a power that is “permitted, recognized, and protected by the party,” which is framed as the representative of the people (D. Huang 107). Still, Yu Lun Jian Du does empower media to some extent, giving journalists limited freedom to check social powers within the bottom line. For example, the participation of the media and online users is instrumental in Xi Jinping’s anticorruption campaign.

Meanwhile, in addition to shaping media discourse from outside, the CCP also motivates scholars to pursue research that is related to the party’s goals by promoting specific terms and categories of research through grants and control over access to publications. Around 2014, a course named “Marxist Journalism” was added to the curriculum as a mandatory course in journalism school to ensure the ideological grounding of future journalists. However, it was such

²¹ This is a term first used by Deng Xiaoping in 1982 and has since become a core concept in the CCP’s political theories. The term refers to the notion that China is in a primary stage of socialism, and all policies have to be adapted to the social conditions at different times. In fact, this is a vague term without clear definition, and what “Chinese characteristics” entails is left to interpretation by each leadership regime (as shown in the examples mentioned here).

an unfamiliar expression that few professors knew how to teach the topic. Thereafter, the party provided significant funding for the leading journalism schools to establish a standard syllabus that can be shared. In addition, the CCP has launched a “Joint Model” campaign linking propaganda departments and journalism schools to enhance the party’s leadership in journalism education (Xu 178). The project puts local propaganda departments in cooperation with local universities to jointly run journalism schools. However, it is also worth noting that like other political campaigns, procedures for implementing these joint programs are only vaguely outlined, leaving their actual effects in doubt (Xu 182).

2.5. Concluding Remarks

In sum, shaped by the social evolution of Chinese society, media operation in China bears unique features. Two types of media organizations, namely the party organ that serves as the party’s propaganda apparatus and the commercial media that operates under market principles, coexist within China’s media system. China’s 1990s economic boom had positive effects on the Chinese commercial media in terms of the variety of publications as well as the level of freedom that journalists enjoyed in their work. The arrival of digital technology had similar effects on news production, providing alternate channels to collect and disseminate information as well as space for public participation in social events. However, it would be misleading to suggest that the “freedom” that Chinese journalists enjoy means the same thing as it does in Western contexts. As multiple studies have shown, the Opening did not change the fact that the commercial media is ultimately controlled by the party and must cooperate in the party’s campaigns to ensure so-called social stability and ideological control (Guo; C. Huang; Lee, “The Conception of Chinese Journalists”; Wang, “How Big Is the Cage?”; Xu and Sun; Zhao, *Communication in China*). As the party continues to update its control mechanisms, the space for independent journalism decreases. To take the practice of investigative journalism in China as an indication of the level of media control and media development, scholars observed a rise in investigative reporting starting in 2003, reaching a new height in 2009 with the advent of WeChat, and then a sharp decrease in 2013 (Svensson, “The Rise and Fall” 440; see also Zhang and Cao). The rise and fall of the investigative journalism showcase the continuous negotiation between the state, the market, journalism professionals, and the public over time.

This negotiation is also reflected in newspapers’ digitization processes, as the party seeks to maintain control, the media search for a viable future, journalists look to redefine their profession, and the public demands more information and power. The three newspapers in this study offer a glimpse into these struggles. Several points are worth mentioning before I move onto the empirical evidence. First is the overall tightening of control in general since President Xi took office. These three newspapers’ digital transitions were happening against the backdrop of an administration that holds the ideological field as a key battleground, both domestically and internationally. Second, a rapidly growing yet highly competitive market deepened the economic crisis experienced by the commercial media and compromised its ability to challenge political control. It is fair to say that, on balance, the commercial media organizations were more concerned with economic viability than journalistic reform. Furthermore, the respective market share of party and commercial media organizations is being restructured as a result of the commercial media’s weakening. Wang and

Sparks argue for a “resurgence of the Party press” in their most recent works (“Chinese Newspaper Groups”). A similar trend is observed among the three newspapers in this study. In addition, I would argue that a hybridized press—commercial in status but party organ in nature—is now in formation.

Chapter 3: The Newsrooms and Their News Production



Figure 3.1 WeChat posts by journalists from three newsrooms about a breaking event.

On December 23, 2019, the court sentence for Sun Xiaoguo, a suspect accused of rape, manslaughter, and taking part in gangster activities, was announced. This was a high-profile case that had attracted national attention and extensive media coverage. Minutes after the announcement, the news appeared on nearly every major news outlet and social media.

The figure (3.1) on the left is a screenshot of my WeChat post page at that moment.²² As it shows, my page, where posts from my friends were displayed chronologically, was filled with reposts from the journalists from the three newsrooms. These posts were sent almost simultaneously and with similar titles (except *Pengpai*'s).

This screenshot showcases three features of news production not only at the three newsrooms but also more generally for media in the digital age: the pursuit of immediacy, the importance of social media platforms, and information overflow and homogeneity, all of which will be discussed in this chapter.

Having presented the historical evolution of and the social conditions for media digitization in China in the previous chapter, this chapter zooms in on the three newspaper organizations under study. The following sections provide an overview of the three Chinese newsrooms: *Pengpai*, *The Kaiping News*, and *The Yunnan Daily*. It starts with a portrait of the three newsrooms, presenting their organizational structures, digitization strategies, the relationship between the online and print teams, newsroom dynamics, and daily routines. An analysis of the level of multimedia involved in each case will follow. Assisted by a content analysis, this chapter deals with the questions of what

²² The screenshot was edited to mask users' names and their profile photos. Text is added for clarification.

kind of news is produced, how is it produced, and how is it disseminated, before turning to the question of *why* in the following chapters.

Research on news production in the digital age from Western countries has revealed that the current state of journalism is entangled with both transformations and continuities of the profession in face of new technologies (Anderson, *Rebuilding the News*; Boczkowski; Boyer; Meikel and Redden; Michelstein and Boczkowski; Usher). My observation shows that the practices at the three newsrooms follow similar trends. The three newspapers differ in terms of scale of production as well as the level of use of multimedia technologies. While trying to embrace the emerging values of digital news—those being immediacy, multimedia, and participation—the conventional practices of the press persist and print culture was found to be pertinent in all three cases. Driven by both the party’s initiative in occupying online platforms as well as the press’s shrinking market, the actual strategy and practices in each newsroom were contingent on available resources. At present, it would be fair to say that these newspapers remain largely “We-Publish-You-Read” outlets, to borrow Boczkowski’s term.

It is worth noting that digitization happened in China at a different pace than most cases documented in the English-language literature (Sparks et al.; Zhao, “Understanding China’s Media”). As explained in the previous chapter, newspapers in China only started to experience economic distress around 2013. Therefore, a portrait of the three newspapers and how they engaged in digital production is crucial to pinpoint the state of daily newsmaking practices at Chinese newspapers, the first step towards a nuanced understanding of journalism in China beyond the normative Western view.

3.1. Newsrooms Dynamics at Three Organizations

This study focuses on three newsrooms in China, namely *Pengpai* (Shanghai), *The Kaiping News* (Kunming), and *The Yunnan Daily* (Kunming). Shanghai serves as a showcase for China’s modernization, while Kunming is the capital of the southwestern province Yunnan. These two cities are hardly comparable in terms of population and economy. In the print age, this gap mattered less because geographic boundaries shielded newspapers from competition in other locales. These three newspapers were all the leading outlets in their respective markets. The booming economy of the 1990s and 2000s provided them with a very profitable advertising market. At peak performance in the early 2000s, the *CCWB* (the print newspaper that owns *The Kaiping News*) had a yearly revenue of 300 million (personal interview, May 17, 2018) while the *Oriental Morning Post* reported a similar amount of 240 million in 2012 (Wei). However, the market dynamic has shifted in the digital era. Competition from large national organizations and the economic burden of digitization reform put local newspapers in a very difficult situation.

Each of the three newsrooms took very different approaches to moving online. Thanks to financial support from the state and the political capital that came along with it, *Pengpai* has grown from a metropolitan daily into one of the largest digital outlets in China with national coverage. However, its success is largely a product of a specific time in history and its experience is hardly applicable to other newspapers. Meanwhile, despite its success online, the newsroom’s print

traditions and the bureaucracy of a state-owned organization still greatly affected the digitization process.

As for *The Kaiping News*, which has a much smaller online newsroom with less funding in parallel to the print newsroom, digitization raised questions about the future role of local media in the digital age. Facing competition from the influential national media and internet service providers, its online journalists were anxious to explore new reporting strategies while expanding their business into new fields such as e-commerce. I found the journalists there much more open towards new technologies compared to their counterparts at *Pengpai*. However, there was a clear gap between the print and online staff. Print journalists were not willing to cooperate with the online newsroom and tended to consider the digital outlet an interruption rather than an ally.

The third newspaper, *The Yunnan Daily*, was exempted from the economic ordeal that most of the commercial newspapers were going through. As a party organ, its finances were assured by stable subscriptions and party funding. Therefore, the journalists there were less anxious about their future careers but much slower to respond to new technologies. *The Yunnan Daily*'s digital reform was mostly a reaction to the CCP's call for party newspapers to resume a leading position online. The online newsroom was split between the duty of a party newspaper to serve the CCP and the new dynamic of online communication. Despite having a group of young and elite journalists, its endeavors were largely subject to the party leader's personal preferences and political control. It is fair to say that the print newsroom still holds a dominant position at *The Yunnan Daily*, while the online group serves as a shining façade.

The following section provides a portrait of these three newsrooms, offering insight into the state of each newspaper today. As the descriptions will reveal, their newsroom structure and office arrangements might seem unusual at times, and they do not meet the needs of an online newsroom. This situation is common for most of the digital outlets born within print newsrooms. The online newsroom is usually the product of compromises and provisional arrangements, a reflection of the reality of the ongoing transition at most media organizations in China. In *Pengpai*'s case, instead of keeping a newsroom that corresponded to production needs, the outlets had to create posts in order to accommodate the print staff. As a result, there were multiple teams with overlapping work duties. For example, video staff from different teams often competed for the same story and sometimes ended up producing similar news. Similarly in all three newsrooms, the whole team was divided into fragmented spaces with little interaction among them, contrary to the common concept of online newsroom that often requires shared space to facilitate coordination.

3.1.1. The Relationship with the Print Newsroom

- *Pengpai*

Pengpai's newsroom is located in a separate building across the street from the headquarters of *Shanghai Press Group*. It is the only newspaper in this study that no longer runs a print outlet. After *Pengpai*'s parent newspaper *Oriental Morning Post* ceased publishing in 2017, all the print staff began working for the online outlet. At the time of my visit in 2018, it had a total of 673 staff members spread out on five floors in a building shared with other news organizations in the group.

My observation focused on the Visual Center on the fourth and fifth floors, where most of the production related to multimedia elements took place. There were seven other newsrooms that ran in parallel. These were occupied by the print staff of different sections of the newspaper and still mainly produced written articles after merging into *Pengpai*.

A content management system (CMS) was in place to facilitate coordination and publication. However, rather than serving as a platform to share resources, it was mainly used as publication software because only finished work would be uploaded. In most cases, the chief of each team had the authority to sign off and publish stories within their designated section. A review by high-ranking editors would be required if the topic was considered sensitive.

The Visual Center, where my study took place, used to be the photography department of the *Oriental Morning Post*. The paper made its name in the early years through the high quality and international coverage of its photographic reports and had gathered some of the most talented and passionate journalists in China. This department became the birthplace of *Pengpai* when the newspaper business started to fall in the early 2010s. It remained the core newsroom for multimedia reporting after the merger with the print newsroom. Launched in July 2014, *Pengpai* soon became an influential online newspaper because of its critical views on current events. But its editorial style has taken a turn towards the soft in recent years. Notably, there was a clear shift in early 2016, when some 30 journalists left *Pengpai* to start a mobile application, Pear Video. Most of them were senior members of the newsroom frustrated by the growing pressure of censorship and the disputes between the editorial team and management. A group of young journalists have since joined the Visual Center.

- *The Kaiping News*

The Kaiping News is the digital outlet of the *Chun Cheng Evening Post (CCWB)*, operated by a team of approximately 50 staff. Their office was located on the first floor in the building of *Yunnan Daily News Group*, the home to some 13 outlets as well as an online portal for the provincial government. However, the app editorial team sat separately in the Command Center together with the online operating staff from other outlets in the group. This center was set up to share news resources and encourage communication between different digital outlets within the news group. But in reality, the teams seldom interact with each other. Although the whole group shared the same CMS, editors typically only had access to the content published by their own journalists. Moreover, the CMS was originally designed to serve the print news production team with little consideration for online publication. The editing and publishing of online news had to take place on a separate platform that only the app team had access to.

Initially, the digital news outlets adopted the name of the newspaper *CCWB* because it was an influential brand in the newspaper age. In 2016, the marketing strategy of the app shifted towards the “service + content” model, underlying the community connections of the local newspaper. The app has since added other services in addition to news production to its plate, such as education consulting, banking, and e-commerce, among others. Aiming to attract users younger than the readers of the newspaper, the online team preferred to establish their own brand. To break with the legacy brand that might appear outdated to a younger generation, the online outlet eventually

renamed itself *The Kaiping News* in 2019 in an effort to establish a new image.

By 2018, the *CCWB* was still printing with a yearly circulation of 120,000 to 150,000, or half the number in 2013 (300,000). The journalists of the print newsroom produced most of the original reports, while the online journalists were rewriting, re-editing, and aggregating from print stories and other online resources. The app team of the online newsroom was responsible for selection and publishing. There had been some longtime disputes between the two newsrooms. On the one hand, the digital editors complained that the print journalists did not understand the requirements of online news; on the other, the journalists considered comments from their online counterparts to be unprofessional and were unhappy that the online team made decisions regarding the online publication of their work. When I visited the newsroom in the spring of 2018, *The Kaiping News* was at a critical point. It was making progress in terms of the expanding its app user base as well as advertising income. But to continue moving forward, it would require more support in terms of finance, human resources, and, most importantly, major organizational reform. However, the high-ranking officials, being more concerned with keeping the print newspaper alive and maintaining a balance among the interest groups,²³ were reluctant to push forward more aggressive strategies.

- *The Yunnan Daily*

On the other side of the giant round conference table in the same Command Center sat the online team of *The Yunnan Daily*. As a party organ, the economic situation at *The Yunnan Daily* was completely different from the other two media organizations. The routine operation of the newspaper was self-funded by subscription revenue and other income sources. The party newspaper only circulates by subscription, and their subscribers are government officers and other social institutions that need to keep track of the party's message. Therefore, despite the decline in newspaper readership in general, subscriptions to the party newspaper were unaffected. In the case of *The Yunnan Daily*, its circulation had even increased in 2017 to more than 200,000. Meanwhile, the press is a shareholder of other companies in the group and profits from their income. These companies included several newspapers, advertising companies, and a real-estate agency. Most importantly, as a party organ, it receives government investment for any costly project, such as infrastructure and digital reform.

The mobile application of *The Yunnan Daily* went online in 2015. Given the nature of the press, the print newspaper remained the flagship product of the organization, while digital media was considered to be in a supplementary position. To start with, the online newspaper did not have a clear editorial strategy but only vague instructions "to restore the influence of the party newspaper online" (personal interview, May 23, 2018). The online team had to explore all by themselves to see what style they could use, which tone, and so on. Secondly, the online newsroom was far from

²³ This had to do with the remuneration system at the newspaper. Instead of having a fixed salary, each journalist's income is directly linked to the number of stories that he/she publishes. Thus, a policy that prioritizes digital production would increase the revenue of the online staff and potentially decrease that of the print staff. The compensation formula also takes into account the advertising revenue that his/her team produces. Chapter 4 will go into more detail about this issue.

the main offices of the newspaper staff. There was very little interaction between the online and print newsrooms, even over phone or via text. Except for the weekly meeting on Monday, I seldom saw the high-ranking director who oversaw the online newspaper in the newsroom. Editors would communicate with him via WeChat or over phone should consultation be needed. What's more, there was very little technical support for the online team. The mobile application was the product of a student's work in 2015, and it was only updated for the first time in 2019. The structure and design of the application was clearly out of date, as was the editing system. The editors had to use a third-party editing tool to do the work and then copy back.

3.1.2. The Newsroom Structure

1. A Sociodemographic Overview

During my stay in the newsrooms, I went around the online newsroom to talk to as many people as I could to collect their biographical information. This data gives a sense of the personnel composition at each newsroom, but it is worth noting that this survey focuses on the online team. In *Pengpai's* case, only the staff of the Visual Center is included. Data is summarized in table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Sociodemographic Overview of the Newsroom Staff

	Total staff	Total surveyed	Age			Sex		Education		Experience in other org.
			20-30	30-40	40+	Male	Female	Journalism related	Other	
<i>Pengpai</i>	109	43 (39%)	23 (42%)	18 (53%)	2 (5%)	16 (38%)	27 (62%)	25 (56%)	18 (44%)	15 (35%)
<i>Kaiping</i>	Editorial	38 (45%)	5 (23%)	10 (59%)	2 (18%)	8 (47%)	9 (53%)	10 (59%)	7 (41%)	2 (18%)
	IT ²⁴	7 (100%)	5 (71%)	2 (29%)	0	6 (86%)	1 (14%)	0	7 (100%)	7 (100%)
<i>Yunnan Daily</i>	18	18 (100%)	6 (50%)	5 (42%)	1 (8%)	6 (33%)	12 (67%)	5 (42%)	7 (58%)	6 (50%)

²⁴ This survey is a portrait of the personnel who are physically present in the newsroom. *The Kaiping News* is the only organization among these three to have IT staff present in the online newsroom. For the other two newsrooms, technical support was ensured by a separate team; therefore the data is not included.

In April 2018, *Pengpai's* Visual Center had 109 staff in its Shanghai base plus a Beijing group with around 20 journalists. The biographical information that I collected from 42 journalists shows a relatively young team. More than half of the journalists were in their twenties, and another 43% were in their thirties. The majority (62%) of the newsroom staff were women. Among the journalists, 44% of them held a degree in journalism or a related major, while 35% have previously worked for other media-related organizations.

The digital group at *The Kaiping News* includes 52 staff, seven of whom are IT professionals. In the editorial group, 59% of the journalists are in their thirties and another 29% in their twenties. Out of the 17 editorial staff I interviewed, ten of them studied journalism or a related major. Notably, almost all the journalists previously worked in the print newsroom, except for the IT group. The majority of the IT team was male, while the number of men and women were almost equal in the editorial team. It is worth mentioning that this is the only case of the three where IT support is integrated into the newsroom. This team is in charge of the design of the mobile application as well as its daily performance. They also work on data collection and analysis of users, online information surveillance, development of digital tools or platforms as required by the editorial staff, as well as staff training. For example, during the time that I was there, they had just finished a live streaming platform that would allow journalists to send live videos back directly from the field.

The Yunnan Daily employed a much smaller online team. Twelve out of its 18 staff were women, and half of the journalists were still in their twenties. To my surprise, 67% of the online staff had not majored in journalism, the biggest proportion among the three newspapers. Their backgrounds are also more diverse, with less than half having worked for other media organizations.

Although the scale of the newsroom differs, the profile of each newsroom demonstrates a similar trend: the practitioners are relatively young, there is a higher percentage of female journalists, and about half of them specialized in journalism or a related major. These characteristics roughly match the data presented in other research on Chinese journalists, notably Zhang and Su's study²⁵ and the *Worlds of Journalism*²⁶ project led by Hanitzsch and his international team. According to the cross-national sample in *Worlds of Journalism*, Chinese journalists are significantly younger than their counterparts in North America and most European countries. Their findings reveal that places where the media was established early on tend to have older journalists (Hanitzsch et al. 90). In that sense, the fact that the Chinese media industries only developed substantially in the past 30 years or so is consistent with a younger age profile. Meanwhile, both studies also show "a notable and consistent trend in the increasing percentage of female journalists" (Zhang and Su 14). Hanitzsch et al. give credit to Marxist and socialist feminism that emphasizes work as materially changing a woman's life situation as a factor in China's gender balance. Anecdotally, my years teaching at journalism school also witnessed a higher percentage of female students, and that difference continued to grow over the past few years

²⁵ An overview of their sample in China (collected in 2010): 52.9 % female journalists, median age of 33.1, and 93.4% holds a bachelor's degree or higher (Zhang and Su).

²⁶ An overview of their sample in China (collected 2012–16): 50.5% female journalists, median age of 33, and 76.2% studied journalism (Hanitzsch et al. 2019).

to the point that we have become one of the departments with the lowest number of male students in our university.

2. The Division of the Newsroom

- Pengpai

There were seven teams in the Visual Center: user interface (UI), video I, video II, data journalism, live broadcasting, photo editing, and news aggregation. They were located in three different places in the building. Two teams were on the fourth floor and worked independently: photo editing was responsible for making sure the format of the photos was compatible with the different platforms, while the news aggregation team repurposed videos from other media organizations with or without editing.

Video II, the former economic news team of the *Oriental Morning Post*, was relatively distant from the rest of the newsroom and had their own workspace on the eleventh floor. This team consisted of a group of journalists who did not want to be merged into other teams when the press stopped publishing. Instead, they founded a second video team focusing on economic-related stories and remained in their original office.

The remaining four teams shared an open space on the fifth floor, together with the chief and vice-chief editors. The staff on the fifth floor was the core of the Visual Center, producing original reports independently or in cooperation with other departments. The chief and vice-chief editors sat right next to the door, overseeing everyone who went in and out of the newsroom.

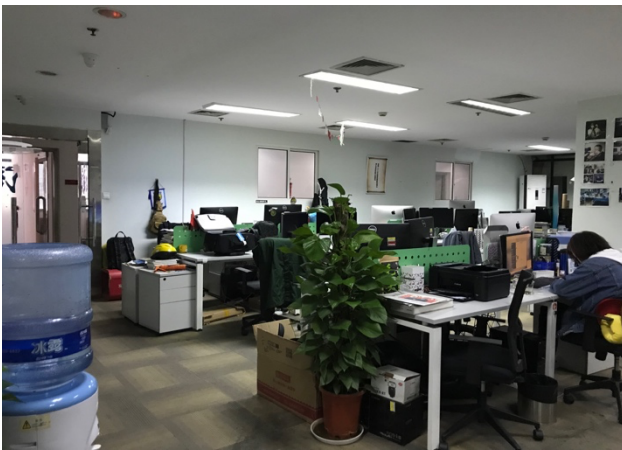


Figure 3.2 Visual Center – Pengpai



Figure 3.3 Visual Center – Pengpai

The Visual Center on the fifth floor. The photos were taken around 3 p.m. on a working day. Half of the office was empty.

- *The Kaiping News*

Because of the organization's constantly shifting digitization strategy, the online team at *The Kaiping News* had undergone several reforms. The current online group was formed in March 2016, when the press decided to shift its focus to the mobile application. There were nine teams in the online newsroom, including video, design, app operation, live broadcasting, social media, e-commerce, advertising, and IT support. This team of seven staff oversaw the creation, design, daily operation, and data collection and analysis of *The Kaiping News* application. Some of them volunteered to join, while the others only came because their position was eliminated when the newspaper reduced the scale of its production.

The online newsroom was desperately in need of young journalists who understood digital culture. But they hadn't recruited anyone because of the declining business and limited budget. As a senior editor said, the newspaper business had lost its charm and was therefore no longer attractive to graduates (personal interview, May 7, 2018).



Figure 3.4 The main office of the newsroom on the first floor



Figure 3.5 The app team on the third floor

- *The Yunnan Daily*

The digital outlet of *The Yunnan Daily* was run by a small team of 17 editors and one technician. Two senior editors oversaw the daily operation of the online team, while the rest of the staff worked in two shifts with a supporting group of graphic designers. The two high-ranking officers assigned to the online team worked from the newspaper's main office space on the nineteenth floor and were seldom present in the newsroom. Running on a small scale and being far away from the party newspaper's main offices, the online team had a rather flat structure. The editors carried out various tasks in rotation. Their main responsibility was to keep the paper's mobile app updated, but they also took turns to produce WeChat news and maintain a Tibetan website that was under testing.



Figure 3.6 The online team of *The Yunnan Daily*.²⁷

The morning-shift editors had finished their work and were about to leave.

3.1.3. A Typical Day at the Newsroom

- *Pengpai*

Like most media organizations around the world, the Visual Center did not have fixed office hours. Journalists usually worked at their own pace, organizing their day around whatever project they were working on. A typical day at the newsroom usually started after nine thirty in the morning, sometimes even ten. At around 11:00 a.m., some staff members already started to leave for lunch to avoid the rush hour in the cafeteria. The newsroom was much livelier in the afternoon, but there were still quite a few empty seats in the office. These seats belonged to journalists who either had recently left the organization or were out for fieldwork. After 7:00 p.m., the newsroom started to quiet down again.

A regular editorial meeting took place at 10:00 a.m. every workday. The participants were the chiefs of each newsroom, and they would present the news that would go online in the coming two to three days. Unfortunately, I was not granted access to these meetings. According to a senior staff member of the UI group who used to participate in these meetings, the reports presented by each newsroom were usually almost completed, and therefore the meeting was more like a report of the result than an editorial discussion; it was for this reason that he stopped attending the meetings (personal interview, April 4, 2018). Indeed, during my time in the newsroom I seldom saw the chief-editors communicate with the newsroom staff before or after the meeting. Meanwhile, each

²⁷ This photo has been edited to blur the faces of the journalists.

group of the Visual Center held its own editorial meeting, which usually took place in the conference room on the fifth-floor office or around their own desk. These meetings were not regular except for those of the data journalism team. This group gathered weekly to discuss ongoing projects as well as to review published work, while the others usually met only as required by the case.

In general, the work pace at the newsroom was relatively slow. There was very little sight of rushing or anxiety, which is in sharp contrast to the other two newsrooms. Most journalists seemed to be very comfortable with their current situation, walking around and chatting with each other. One journalist explained to me that there had been a period of panic at *Pengpai*, especially around 2017 when the press stopped publishing. But the newsrooms had stabilized since then, and the fear of losing their jobs was no longer there.

- *The Kaiping News*

Most staff of the online newsroom did not work around a daily news cycle except for the app and social media teams. They followed the usual 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. office schedule. However, the pace was different for the app team on the third floor. To make sure there was always something new on the app, the app team worked from 7:00 a.m. until midnight, divided into three rotations: 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., 1:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., and 4:00 p.m. to midnight. However, the workload for each shift was different. The busiest time at the desk was the later afternoon, because that was when most print journalists finished their reports. There were fewer updates in the morning and evening, so only one editor and one copy editor were on duty.

The editorial meeting of the *CCWB* was at 4:00 p.m. every Monday. Editors from the print and online teams were required to participate and present the reports they were working on. However, the online staff were often absent because they considered the meeting unhelpful. From what I witnessed, the meeting's agenda was very much concerned with the print newspaper, preoccupied with how to fill the pages and balance interests among different teams. I noticed that the print journalists were often reluctant to share their news resources, and the participation of the digital group was seldom mentioned. Having found the editorial meeting unhelpful, the online newsroom held its own weekly meeting each Monday, one with the IT team and another with the editorial team.

Unlike *Pengpai*, which had a clear editorial strategy from the very beginning, journalists at *The Kaiping News* were still in search of what a digital local newspaper should cover and how. In the beginning, they followed the tradition of the print newspaper, highlighting their connection to the community and focusing on local news. But national news was added in early 2008, because they feared that in the digital age a press without a national view would be seen as out of date and lose users. However, without any journalists covering national news, it was up to the app editors to produce that content by repurposing information found online. Each of the five editors were required to produce five national stories every day. However, this policy was reversed when *The Kaiping News* turned its purview back to local news in 2019. Apart from news, the newsroom tried to integrate other services into its application in order to increase readership, such as offering deals with local merchants, building an online portal for making medical appointments and bank services, organizing school information sessions, and so on. However, the result was far from ideal.

This shifting strategy reflects the impact of the unclear prospects for local newspapers in the digital age. Certainty seems to be always out of reach in the face of a constantly shifting dynamic; therefore, journalists can only use a strategy of trial and error. In *The Kaiping News* newsroom, I sensed a strong sentiment of anxiety. There was a big question mark hanging over everyone's heads regarding which direction the newspaper should follow as a local outlet and what their professional future entailed. Nearly every conversation I had with the journalists would turn to the critical situation the newspaper was facing. The decrease in income, the difficulty in attracting online users, and problematic management were some of their major concerns. And yet, the journalists were doing a very difficult job with fewer resources. On the one hand, the journalists were responsible for exploring new skills and technologies, which was extremely challenging and energy consuming. On the other hand, the business of the newspaper was declining, and the reaction of the market was hard to predict.

- *The Yunnan Daily*

Overseen by two senior editors, the daily work of the online team was to select and edit the news written by print journalists and publish it online. They also reposted from other authorities such as *Xinhua*, *The People's Daily*, and other party newspapers. However, their performance was largely subject to party policy, leaving little leeway for individual journalists. The only exception was the content posted on their WeChat account over which they had more autonomy. The editors took turns working on the WeChat news. Unlike the rigid writing style of the party newspaper, the news on WeChat was more vivid and tailored towards the taste of online users.

A day at the online desk started with a brief editorial meeting attended by the morning shift editors. They would scan that day's *The Yunnan Daily* for any news that was not on the app yet and discuss the topic of the WeChat news. Ideas usually came from current events or the editor's personal social media network. The evening shift started at 4:00 p.m. This was usually the time when the print journalists submitted the day's work. Not all news was ready for online publication though. News concerning provincial and municipal leaders could only be put online after the publication of the print newspaper, while any others news was for the online editors to choose.

Unlike their colleagues across the room at *The Kaiping News*, this side of the room was much quieter. The party newspaper has clear rules about what can be said and how, leaving little space for the editors to work on their own. The online editors at *The Yunnan Daily* were in general more conscious about CCP-led ideology and followed its agenda carefully. Meanwhile, there was very little pressure because expectations were not high. There was no formal evaluation regarding the performance of the digital outlet nor specific requirements for their daily workload. Through my interactions with the online staff, I noticed, however, feelings of confusion and powerlessness among them. Such sentiments grew from the ambivalent position of the online newsroom within the organization.

The online editors, being the elites among their peers, were passionate about the possibilities made available by the new technologies. And yet, they did not feel valued due to their secondary position in the organization and the lack of direction from the top. They were eager to change the conventional view people held about the party newspaper, only to find themselves wondering where the future of the party newspaper stood. In theory, digitalization was the future, and it should have been the priority of organizational development. But in practice, the nature of being a party

newspaper meant that the political goals were the most essential. For now, the party's call for digitization remained a vague slogan, leaving each newspaper troubled in the absence of an actual strategy. Due to their pursuit of stability, the party newspaper was reluctant to make any radical changes. In the case of *The Yunnan Daily*, the print outlet would continue to be the core of the organization, while the online newsroom served as its shining façade.

3.2. Multimedia Production at the Three Newspapers

I conducted a content analysis of the three outlets to examine to what extent the content of the three digital outlets reflected the emerging values of the digital era. Combined with the descriptions of the newsroom dynamics above, this information offers insight into the state of the three organizations in their digitization processes. In this section, I borrow from Nikki Usher's categorization in *Making News at the "New York Times"*—in which she views newsroom practices through the lens of three values: immediacy, interactivity (multimedia),²⁸ and participation—to further illuminate the state of digital production at the three news organizations. As Usher argues, these values emerge from the routines that were (or were not) in place, and they are the overarching terms that help categorize the new priorities, goals, and felt imperatives organizing news production at this time (6). In my observation, these three Chinese media outlets were trying to embrace the same values as Western outlets in their transition online. While there may have been additional motivations at work, such as the pursuit of independence or party allegiance, these three values remained the guiding terms in journalists' efforts to digitize their newspapers. However, as this chapter will show, the actual products of their work may not fully reflect these values. The gap between what they envisioned and what they were able to do points to the social constraints in place.

For each outlet, two kinds of news were collected every day from October 26, 2018, to November 1, 2018: one was the news on their mobile applications, and the other was their WeChat account publications. It is worth noting that news published on the WeChat platform is not merely a copy of or a link to the original news content; publishing on WeChat involves a whole process of selection, rewriting, and re-editing. In some cases, the content is produced exclusively for WeChat. Therefore, I separated news published on mobile applications from those on the outlet's WeChat account. Given that the scale of daily production is much greater at *Pengpai* than at the other two newspapers, only the top ten most-popular news stories and the featured news from each section were analyzed, while I collected all the news on the mobile applications of *The Kaiping News* and *The Yunnan Daily*. Meanwhile, all WeChat production was included. A total of 710 articles were examined. In a few cases, the same report might appear in both categories but edited differently to meet the needs of each platform; therefore, the two appearances are counted as two reports.

²⁸ Interactivity can refer to two kinds of relationships related to news. Usher employs this concept when she talks about the interactive experiences between the user and the computer. However, Steensen uses interactivity to describe the human-to-human interactions of online journalism, which could be confused with the third term participation. For clarity, I use the term multimedia instead.

The composition of the samples is shown in the table below:

Table 3.2 Overview of News Samples

		Sample	Grab News	Video	Infographic
<i>Pengpai</i>	App	99	68(69%)	15 (16%)	5
	WeChat	175	79 (45%)	34 (19%)	(2%)
<i>The Kaiping News</i>	App	244	44 (18%)	13 (7%)	8
	WeChat	39	24 (62%)	4 (10%)	(3%)
<i>The Yunnan Daily</i>	App	143	69 (48%)	0	5
	WeChat	18	12 (67%)	0	(3%)
Total		710			

3.2.1. Immediacy

In the digital age, the demand for timely news is amplified as the technical ability to share the news immediately after it happens has become available and competition among media has become fiercer. Timeliness, or immediacy, has taken on another meaning: to break the news ASAP, 24/7. As Anderson puts it, news time has become compressed, resulting in “a culture of frequent filing” (*Rebuilding the News* 62). The trend of breaking news faster and faster is constant across different newsrooms. Multiple studies show that practitioners are under growing pressure to keep content fresh throughout the day “even when no one is looking” (Usher 122; see also: Anderson, *Rebuilding the News*; Anderson, “Towards a Sociology”; Boczkowski; Boyer). Boyer calls it “a temporality of continuous anticipation” fostered by the lack of an endpoint and the continuity of content rotation (69).

However, I did not find the rushing scene often described by many recent newsroom ethnographies at any of my sites. Still, the working schedule at all three newsrooms was affected by the culture of ASAP to some extent. Nearly every journalist I interviewed found his or her pace of work accelerated. The three newsrooms, influenced by their own organizational culture, dealt with immediacy differently. At *Pengpai*, journalists took pride in the quality of their reports rather than their speediness. The digital outlet relied on aggregation for daily news reports, completed with timely follow-up for events deemed important. As for *The Kaiping News* and *The Yunnan Daily*, the rhythm of the digital outlets was still greatly influenced by the print news cycle. A large part of the news only became available towards the end of the day. Therefore, the morning news had less original content, and publication was also less frequent. The newsroom teams, despite their willingness to embrace digital culture, were hindered by organizational constraints. Meanwhile, social media has become a significant player in news production for all three newspapers. Social

media platforms, especially WeChat, were not only a source but also an important channel to reach their audience.

- *Pengpai*

Among these three digital outlets, *Pengpai* has the most complicated mobile application. Users can switch through 17 pages on top of the screen, and there are also five sections with 80 columns in total under the menu. Each team can publish their work directly but only under the authorized columns. Three sections on the front page are frequently updated: the photo slide on top, the featured news under the photo, and the rolling list at the bottom. The photo slide displays five key news stories of the day. After the morning update, these photos usually sit there for as long as half a day except for significant events. Four featured news stories are listed under the photos. These are reports deemed important by the front-page editors. They will also decide where a story will sit and for how long (usually for one or two hours). In general, the priority will go to national events and original reports (personal interview, April 15, 2018). Down the page is a rolling list that is constantly updated. Except for PR pieces, all newly published news will be listed in order of the time of publication. More than one hundred pieces of news go through the list every day, the most among the three newspapers. However, many of them are not original reports. To save time, these are mostly reposted from other media organizations and social media resources. This practice is called “grab news” (Zhua Qu Xin Wen, 抓取新闻) among practitioners; I observed it at the other two newsrooms as well, and it will be discussed it in more detail later in this section.

- *The Kaiping News*

Kaiping's mobile application includes ten story sections, a video channel, and a page to display user uploaded clips. Most of its news work is displayed in the front page “Recommended” section (Tui Jian, 推荐), while more than half of the sub-pages were not frequently updated. The front page includes the photo slide on top and a rolling list of news running under; promotion of services such as e-commerce would sometimes interrupt the list. Three stories displayed in the photo are generally updated daily, but sometimes a piece would stay longer. For example, my data shows that an informative graphic report about a seasonal transmissible disease remained on the slide display for up to four days. The rolling list is mostly updated between 6:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. because that is when most journalists finish their reports for the press. When there are no available stories, editors turn to online resources, reposting or repurposing news from other outlets. The editors would also adjust the order of the list as they saw fit. Yesterday's news might stay on the front page because it was deemed important or attracted visits. However, despite the team's eagerness to catch the news in a timely manner, they lacked the capacity to follow-up. In the case of a breaking event, they might react as fast as *Pengpai* (sometimes even faster). However, they seldom expanded a story after a report went online. Frequent updates and in-depth exploration—what *Pengpai* does—are usually missing at *The Kaiping News*.

- *The Yunnan Daily*

The app of *The Yunnan Daily* is the least updated among the three digital outlets. The front page has a simple layout with a photo slide on top, followed by top news and other news items ordered by time listed below. The photo slide and the top news are updated irregularly (sometimes up to a week in between); the news list has the most updates in the late afternoon and early evening. On a

slow day, there may be no updates for a few hours during the day. In fact, refreshing the front page seems to be approached casually at most times. There is no routine for the frequency of updates nor is there for the editor's workload. I found the app editors to be more preoccupied with rewriting articles than keeping up with the 24-hour news cycle. The app's news pace largely depends on the availability of the resources (i.e., articles submitted by the print journalists) and the time it takes for the online editor to work on them.

Three features stood out in determining the newsrooms' work pace:

1) The impact of print culture

Being born within newspaper organizations, digital production in all three newsrooms reveals traces of print culture to various degrees. At *Pengpai*, the legacy was less overt because the app was regularly updated throughout the day. But looking closely, the steady flow of news was mainly achieved by using grab news, while *Pengpai*'s production of original reports did not demonstrate the same sense of the immediacy of the 24/7 news cycle. For example, it usually took two to three days to produce a video and a week or even longer for a report involving data analysis. This was a strategic choice to avoid having to race other media organizations and the IT companies as well as to prioritize the production of in-depth original reports that are less time sensitive. It is also consistent with the tradition of the *Oriental Morning Post*, which emphasized in-depth analysis. *Pengpai*'s journalists took pride in the quality of their product. Therefore, most Visual Center journalists were shielded from the pressure of the 24/7 news cycle.

The situation is different at *The Kaiping News*. Having to rely on the print newsroom's production, there was a clear connection between the digital news cycle and the press cycle. Their news pages were most frequently updated towards the end of the day, which was the deadline for the print newsroom. The working schedule of the app's editing team also reflected this pattern. There was only one editor on duty in the morning, whereas there were up to five in the afternoon. And, as mentioned earlier, further analysis following up a report was rarely seen here. It is fair to say that the 24-hour news cycle of a daily newspaper was clearly on display at *The Kaiping News*.

The influence of the print cycle on digital outlets is even more pertinent at *The Yunnan Daily*, given its status as a party newspaper. Similar to *The Kaiping News*, the print newspaper remained its primary product and the digital newsroom depended on it for the news. However, operating under the principle of "newspaper first, digital second," the core practices of the print newsroom remained unchanged in the face of the digital transformation. There was neither political pressure nor economic motivation for the print journalists to adjust their current working schedule, leaving the online team to grapple for the digital future with limited resources. With no fundamental change in editorial practices, it is not possible for the digital outlet to change the pace.

To be fair, *The Yunnan Daily* faces greater constraints in their exploration of online news. For example, it is a political requirement that all news about high-ranking officials (provincial and above) be first published in print. Also, there is a significant gap between the traditional practices of a party newspaper and the relatively new values of online news. The clash of the two different cultures makes the online team's work more challenging. For example, the party newspaper has a particular writing style characterized by ambiguous language that is often difficult to understand and dull for the public—it takes some heavy editing to make it more readable for online users. As one editor said, "Most parts of the article are not suitable, only one third is helpful. For the rest, I

have to enrich it with online resources” (personal interview, May 29, 2018).

2) The practice of “grab news”

The practice of copy-paste, known as “grab news” (Zhua Qu Xin Wen, 抓取新闻) among professionals, was employed in all three newsrooms that I visited. The pressure to expand coverage with limited resources means that grab news plays an important role in the media’s pursuit of immediacy. As a matter of fact, it has become such a common practice in Chinese media that the Cyberspace Administration of China has even released a list of credible sources. The so-called “White List” (Bai Ming Dan, 白名单) includes hundreds of media organizations on the national, provincial, and municipal levels and is shared nationwide to facilitate the practice.

Among the 99 articles I collected from the *Pengpai* application between October 26 and November 1, 2018, 66 were reposted news, making up two-thirds of the total. On the most extreme day, 11 out of 14 articles came from other news organizations. *Xinhua News Agency*, the *People’s Daily*, and *CCTV* were among the most frequent sources. The selection of the news was done manually by a dozen editors who closely follow the news portal, other media, the government, and other public organizations; self-media²⁹ was excluded. On one senior editor’s phone, there were dozens of news applications that he checked regularly, plus he followed more than one hundred WeChat public accounts. Once a piece was selected, they would usually change the title, leaving the rest of the news untouched as a way to save time and protect themselves from any liability.

During the same period, about 20% of the news published on *Kaiping* was grab news, a lower proportion than at *Pengpai*. Similar to *Pengpai*, the app editors were responsible for selecting and editing by manually going through the news. Each of the five editors was required to produce five pieces per day (however, this was not always the case). In addition to changing the title, they would also revise the writing and add more information if needed. Apart from breaking events, grab news was mostly employed when the original production ran low in order to keep the front page updated (for example, in the morning and early afternoon). Unlike *Pengpai*’s clear strategy in dealing with immediacy, *The Kaiping News* seems indecisive. Instead of developing a long-term plan, its strategy has changed several times in the past two years. During the time I was there, grab news had been recently added to the workload of the app editors to fill the void of national news as well as to keep the app running when there was less original news available to publish. The rationale at the time was that, although *The Kaiping News* had its focus on the Kunming city, geographic boundaries were dissolved online; therefore, digital outlets without a national purview might be considered outdated. But this strategy had little effect. In 2019, *The Kaiping News* reversed this editorial policy, limiting the use of grab news to a minimum and only in the case of major national events. The new strategy was more likely a return to the past, emphasizing the ties the organization established with the local community in the newspaper age. The *Kaiping* application no longer pursued national coverage; instead, it highlighted its role as a local provider of news and services. The frequent shifts reveal the difficulty this local newspaper was in as it tried to find its place in a changing market. “What does *being local* means in today’s world where geographic boundaries are disappearing?” asked a senior editor during our first meeting.

²⁹ Self-media, also called Zi Mei Ti (自媒体), refers to accounts run by individual users on social media platforms.

Unlike their counterparts in the other two newsrooms, the editors at *The Yunnan Daily* were much more cautious about the use of grab news. The digital outlet was instructed not to use social news that was usually more time-sensitive, because it did not meet the standard of a party newspaper. Although almost half of their production was grab news (69 out of 143), most of these items came from party organs such as *Xinhua News Agency*, other party newspapers, and government offices. News sourced from the commercial media was seldom selected apart from *The Kaiping News*, because they were trying to connect with local users. By following a propagandistic agenda that was less affected by online communication dynamics, the culture of ASAP was less valued at *The Yunnan Daily* compared to the other two newspapers.

However, in order to regain popularity, a party newspaper cannot totally ignore public interests. Immediacy has taken on another meaning at *The Yunnan Daily*: “to be present,” meaning to cover the news anyway even though it was late. The way that *The Yunnan Daily* covered the 2018 World Cup is exemplary. The sport is usually not covered by the paper, but it was deemed important for the digital outlet, because missing the event would be seen as out of touch by the public. During a brainstorming discussion about how to cover the upcoming World Cup, the high-ranking editor of the press who oversees the digital team indicated that, “We cannot compete with others in terms of time. We can only hitchhike (Ceng Re Du, 蹭热度),³⁰ the goal is to not be absent” (editorial meeting, April 28, 2018). Eventually they decided to focus on topics that were less time sensitive, such as match reviews, World Cup history, general football knowledge, and so on.

It is worth noting that aggregating is a common practice in Western newsrooms, notably at news portals and in newsrooms with smaller staffs (Anderson, *Rebuilding the News*; Boyer). While *Pengpai*’s use of grab news was more strategic—to minimize the pressure of immediacy and focus on in-depth follow-up instead—the situation was more critical at *The Kaiping News* and *The Yunnan Daily*. Repurposing online information has become the primary way for online staff to produce news. While grab news solved the urgent need to keep their page updated, the quality of such news is questionable and may reduce the capacity of the newsroom to produce valuable news in the long term.

3) Publishing via WeChat

Although there is nothing new in the media using social media platforms to reach online users, the role of WeChat requires closer examination. Instead of serving as a dissemination channel similar to Facebook and Twitter, WeChat functions differently and has generated further impact on news production. In all three newsrooms, publishing on WeChat involved a news production process separate from production for their own website and app. It would be fair to say that WeChat news has become a different form of news that runs in parallel to the newspaper’s own platforms. Before addressing what this new form entails later in the chapter, here I offer a look at the role it plays in the newsroom’s pursuit of immediacy.

³⁰ The expression Ceng Re Du (蹭热度) is a slam that emerged in the digital age and is widely used among professionals. Similar to the term “clickbait” in the West, “hitchhiking” means to follow the heated topics online in order to attract traffic. Sometimes the actual content of the story might have very little to do with the topic, but it is still used as a bait to attract clicks.

All three newspapers pushed news regularly on WeChat during the day. *Pengpai* published three times a day with eight pieces of news each (the maximum that the platform permits), usually from 10:00 to noon in the morning, 4:00 to 5:00 in the afternoon, and 10:00 to 11:00 in the evening respectively. Because of limited space, the editorial strategy for the WeChat account was different from the front page. Online users' short attention span required immediate reports to motivate reading and sharing across social media, so immediacy for the WeChat team meant news from the past few hours. The editors were usually required to select news that was already published on *Pengpai's* own app to avoid any legal disputes, prioritizing news that was exclusive, original, and in-depth to represent the best of *Pengpai*. However, in cases of breaking news, the WeChat editors would also repurpose information online to catch momentum. Out of 168 news samples, more than half are original. Notably, the proportion is even higher among articles with more than 100,000 visits:³¹ among 14 pieces, ten are original work.

Similarly, at *The Kaiping News*, the WeChat team operates separately from the app team, run by two editors but with a different approach. It published daily but less frequently and with fewer stories each time. Contrary to *Pengpai's* strategy, *Kaiping's* WeChat stories relied heavily on repurposed information online. Out of 39 stories produced during one week, only 15 are original reports. The editors have been given the freedom to select the news beyond what is published on the paper's own app, because "the print journalists do not understand online news" (personal interview, May 11, 2018). They rely on their personal resources to spot news. On a regular day, the editor usually selected the topic the night before, worked on the news in the morning, and then pushed it online around noon. If an important event occurred in the afternoon, a second publication might be added. To a certain extent, the WeChat account had become an experimental field for the online team to break out of the constraints of the print newsroom, and the result was rewarding. The WeChat stories in general had more visits and comments than the news on the app. The online newsroom had wanted to push more frequently, but it was not possible due to a staff shortage. However, the situation seems to have improved recently. *The Kaiping News* now publishes three times a day on WeChat, a sign that more resources are being added. Notably, the morning update adopted a similar form from the print newspaper: it summarizes the news from the previous day, mimicking the ritual of the morning post.

The Yunnan Daily's WeChat routine was less rigorous. It published only once a day with three or four stories without a fixed schedule. The news was pushed whenever it was ready, which was usually in the afternoon, but the time differed day by day, depending largely on the work efficiency of the editor on duty. One editor confirmed that they were allowed to select news outside the paper to better appeal to the online public, but they had to rely on online materials, making up roughly two-thirds of the WeChat news stories. Fewer resources and a lack of support from the print newsroom staff were the reasons for the limited production. To lessen the workload, the team had even reduced the number of news items on WeChat, but, still, the timing was difficult to make routine. The situation remains unchanged today, which is another sign that the organization was less invested in the online transition compared to the other two.

³¹ WeChat displays the number of visits for each post but only up to 100,000. News that reaches this number is considered a success.

3.2.2. Multimedia

This section looks at reporting that uses multimedia elements such as interactive graphics, hyperlinks, video, and audio as a way to enrich the story and to create interactive experiences between the user and the platform. Multimedia reporting has become another imperative in online newsrooms as the technological barrier that used to determine the story selection and editing routine is now eroding. For audiences, interactivity means more choice and control over their reading experience. For journalists and editors, however, it challenges the built-in routines and standards at the newsrooms regarding product consideration (Usher 169).

Previous studies have found the promise of digital technology in facilitating multimedia reporting difficult to fulfill (Boczkowski; Steensen; Usher; Yin and Liu). My observations reveal a similar situation at all three media organizations. Notably, textual practices remained in the dominant position at all three newspapers. *Pengpai* had the largest multimedia production group, the Visual Center. However, a considerable part of the staff considered themselves to be in a supportive position, working at the request of print journalists. The sentiment was especially strong among those who used to work for the press but lost their positions as they were no longer required. New forms of reporting such as data journalism and HTML5 projects³²—a form of product often used to converge a story that contains multiple multimedia elements—were being experimented with, but their value was not widely recognized beyond the Visual Center. Print reporting still represented *Pengpai*'s best work. Meanwhile, the lack of staff and proper skill were the main difficulties faced by *The Kaiping News* and *The Yunnan Daily*. At *The Kaiping News*, there were only a few video journalists at the online newsroom who worked on multiple tasks. They were mostly needed to produce feature videos or the live broadcast, leaving the production of daily news to the print journalists who remained reluctant to use video. In the extreme case of *The Yunnan Daily*, it was not until 2019 that its mobile application became compatible for video and audio elements. During my visit in 2018, the editors predicted that producing video would become part of their job at some point, but the plan had yet to concretize.

1. The use of multimedia elements in the reports

- Video

Journalists and editors of the three online newsrooms were very conscious about their print origins, and video was usually the first option that came to mind for adopting a multimedia strategy. At *Pengpai* and *The Kaiping News*, video has become an indispensable supplement to print practice. Both newspapers had recently updated the design of their mobile application to highlight video reports. The video section used to be hard to access given the complicated inner structure of the *Pengpai* application. Now it appears on the top and bottom menus on the front page of their website

³² HTML5 refers to mobile web pages that can be shared via social media platforms, mostly via WeChat.

and the app. The *Kaiping News* created a video section with access from the front page. Both organizations have also employed live broadcasts in their reporting.

According to my data, about 20% of *Pengpai*'s news contains video elements. The proportion is similar for the app and the WeChat account. *The Kaiping News* produced fewer videos: only about 8% of their reports employed video. I further divided the videos into three categories: original production, re-edited video (using images from other sources), and reposted video. The use of indirect sources is especially pertinent in *Pengpai*'s case: with only 15% original work, 45% of their videos came directly from other media. *The Kaiping News* shows a different pattern: the newspaper favoured original product with around 53% produced by their own journalists while reposted videos are mostly used in WeChat news.

However, despite the growing proportion of video reports at the outlets, videos and text are used separately. For example, *Pengpai* prefers video-only reports with a brief introduction. In the video, voiceover is seldom used; instead, subtitles deliver information. Stories with both text and video do appear, but mostly in the aggregated reports published on WeChat. This tendency is even more extreme at *The Yunnan Daily*, which recently added a video section to their app. Without any video journalists, this section only reposts news produced by TV channels.

- Data visualization

Among the three newsrooms, there was a shared understanding that visualizing data was a new option made possible by new technology and was of great efficiency in revealing the underlying issues behind data. However, there was a clear gap in practice between *Pengpai* and the other two outlets due to differences in resources and journalists' skill levels. *Pengpai* had recruited a special team—educated overseas and trained in IT—to focus on producing data journalism. The team were given relatively more leeway to explore the field. In contrast, a lack of personnel and proper skills were major obstacles for the other two newsrooms. At both, visualization work fell under the responsibility of graphic designers. As a result, data visualization remained conceptually close to the layout design for print newspapers. However, the difference is less significant when the total number of reports is taken into account. Only a fairly small proportion of the news contains visualized data, with the static infographic being the most common form. Out of 266 samples I collected from *Pengpai*, five stories included an infographic; that number was eight for *The Kaiping News* and five for *The Yunnan Daily*.

It is necessary to point out that the data team at *Pengpai* actually produced far more news than it is shown in my data. The section “Fine Data Class” (Mei Shu Ke, 美数课) was dedicated to data journalism, and it was updated, on average, once every other day. However, the topic was usually less time sensitive because of the long production time, and the section was hard to access from the front page. As a result, their work seldom made it to the top-visited list that informed my corpus.

2. The new style of WeChat news

Editors working on WeChat news at all three newsrooms unanimously emphasized the different requirements for news transmitted via social media compared to the mobile application. They talked about titles that motivated clicking and sharing (*Pengpai*), about closely following the

top topics on social media (*The Kaiping News*), and about adopting a softer tone than the party newspaper (*The Yunnan Daily*). All these strategies and techniques eventually gave birth to a particular style of WeChat news that differed from the traditional newspaper style. In an effort to appeal to internet users, editors added internet-specific elements (expressions, memes, emoji, etc.) to news reports. However, soft stories are more likely to adopt this style.



Figure 3. 7 A screenshot of a piece of WeChat news from *The Kaiping News*.

Figure 3.6 is a screenshot from a mobile phone displaying a piece of news on WeChat. This is a typical example of the WeChat editing style. Sentences are cut into several pieces and arranged in a layout that resembles a poster. In addition, it mixes news content with emoji and internet expressions to add humour and sarcasm. This style is tailored for smartphone use. Shorter sentences fit smaller screens and a shorter attention span, while humorous symbols and expressions make the reading experience more enjoyable and motivate users to share the story in their social media networks.

It is worth mentioning that not all newsrooms employ this style to the same extent. *Pengpai* has gradually moved away from this style, opting for a more classic, simpler layout. Also, heavy editing is more likely to be applied to soft news.

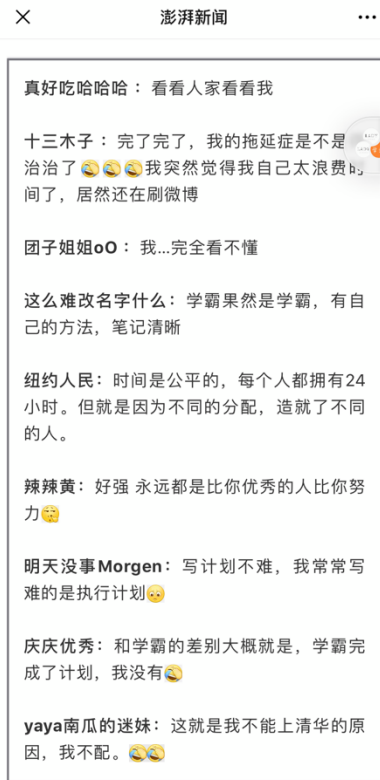
3.2.3. Interactivity

Interactivity, or participation, denotes a major shift in journalists' relationship with their audience, representing another significant change in contemporary journalism. Studies show that users, empowered by digital technology, are gaining importance in the process of news production through commenting, sharing, contributing directly, and affecting journalists' mindset. (Anderson, *Rebuilding the News*; Boczkowski; Boyer; Braun; Serrano Vasquez; Usher). It has become consensus that news organizations need to give more consideration to their audiences' wants and needs and, even more, to cooperate with them in the newsmaking process. In addition to the newsroom's technical capacity and skills, China's particular political and social context comes into play, determining to what extent interactivity is a factor at media organizations.

While journalists seem to agree on the importance of participation for media in the digital age, the question of what interactivity stands for in newsroom practices is left unanswered. The three media organizations that I visited designed how their mobile applications display interactions between the newspaper and their audience differently: in addition to the standard share function and comment section at the bottom, *Pengpai* shows the number of comments and likes at the end of each story; the *Kaiping News* displays the number of visits beside the story's title but only for those with more than 500 clicks; and *The Yunnan Daily* chooses to hide those numbers altogether.

Users' comments, either quoted directly in the news or displayed in the comment section, were the major reflections of interactivity in news reports at all three digital outlets. While *Pengpai*'s users demonstrated the highest level of participation via comments, those of *The Yunnan Daily* remained mostly silent. However, it is a common practice to censor user comments at media organizations in China. That is to say, users' comments would only be made visible with the approval of the editors. To use one arbitrarily chosen report on *Pengpai* as an example, while the number indicated that there were 50 comments, only five were displayed. The same goes for their WeChat account, which even limits the number of comments displayed to 100. In the case of sensitive news, the comment function would be turned off altogether.

Meanwhile, there was growing interest in quoting reader's comments directly in the news, especially on WeChat. All three digital newspapers frequently used direct quotes, usually displayed as screenshots, to appeal to the public and further engage with the audience.



其实，这些是“清华大学优良学风档案史料展”中

Figure 3. 8 Pengpai



Figure 3. 9 The Kaiping News



Figure 3. 10 The Yunnan Daily

However, it is necessary to point out that all this work mentioned was done by a small group of journalists. Only the editing team had access to the totality of all the comments, while the traffic was usually monitored by the IT staff. There was no organizational mechanism in place at the newsrooms to deliver the information to the journalists in an effective way, and most of them remained indifferent to user reaction to their reports. Those who were interested in getting feedback could only monitor the public's comments via the app as their users did.

Hyperlinks are another way to facilitate interactivity, but their use at all three newspapers was often limited to adding links to relevant reports in an effort to extend users' visits within the paper's own services. Using links to connect to other media organizations was less common, despite it being a well-accepted practice for digital newspapers to repost news from each other. In the case of grab news, the source of the story would be identified, but a link was not offered. Rather than connecting with fellow news media organizations, journalists were more conscious about directing users within their own platform.

Among all the news that I collected, only Pengpai occasionally used in-text links (seven out of 274). Five of them were links to a Q&A section "To Ask" (问吧, Wen Ba), in which an expert was invited to answer questions from the users regarding an ongoing issue. In fact, this section was one of Pengpai's experiments with audience engagement. It started as a guest column and became a formal section after seeing the users' enthusiasm in interacting with the author. Later on, a

window was created on the front-page to give direct access to the sections.

It is important to acknowledge that all three newspapers were exploring ways to connect with their audiences offline. These activities were not directly linked to news productions, and therefore they are not reflected in their work. For example, *Pengpai* is attempting to build an intellectual platform by organizing workshops, lectures, and forums; *The Kaiping News* connects with th users by offering services including education, medical care, etc.; and *The Yunnan Daily* visits college campuses to communicate with young students.

3.3. Discussion

This chapter provides a portrait of the three newsrooms that I visited. At first glance, each organization faced very distinct situations. *Pengpai* had a clearer strategy, and its practitioners showed more confidence in their professional work. This is a “successful case” that resembles some of the Western media in the literature to some extent. In contrast, the journalists at *The Kaiping News* were the most affected by the crisis. They were more anxious to get out of the mud by embracing new technology, but at the same time they had to deal with significant difficulties in terms of finance and skill. *The Yunnan Daily* was the least aggressive in digitization. Their journalists felt powerless in the face of the organizational constraints of a party newspaper, knowing the world had changed but not sure how to follow. Without economic motivations, the party newspaper was more concerned with fulfilling its duty and maintaining stability, and therefore it was more cautious in exploring new technology.

However, my study finds that the three newspapers dealt with the emerging values of online news similarly, while the actual production was dependent on each organization’s available resources. Grab news was the main solution for newsrooms wanting to keep their outlet fresh. The high proportion of repurposed content in all three outlets raises further questions about the quality of news and the crowded market. The situation is most critical at *The Kaiping News* and *The Yunnan Daily*, where the practice of aggregating has largely, if not entirely, replaced on-the-ground news reporting due to limited resources. This reliance on secondary sources raises serious concerns about the quality of news as well as the capacity of the newsrooms to produce valuable reports in the long run. Meanwhile, video was the most obvious option when it came to multimedia reporting. While *Pengpai* produced a large amount of video every day, *The Yunnan Daily* could only repost TV news because of the lack of staff. Moreover, there was a preference for using video alone in a report rather than in combination with other elements, such as text and photos. The low level of cooperation between the print and video teams demonstrates that the new forms of practice are yet to converge with the conventional ones. Finally, it would be fair to say that interactivity remained the least developed value at all three newspapers, echoing Steensen’s findings among the Western media. Overall, despite the newspapers’ efforts in constructing digital platforms and disseminating news online, all three outlets had not yet fully integrated the emerging values into their newsmaking practices. As the next chapter will address, there are multiple factors that prevented the journalists from adequately performing these values.

At the same time, Chinese newspapers have developed a two-track relationship with social

media platforms, notably WeChat. While competing with internet-based information services, media organizations rely on WeChat, the most used “mega-app” in China, to seep into the daily life of users. Not only has the publishing service offered by social media platforms become an important disseminating channel for all three newspapers—sometimes even more significant than their own apps and websites—it has also generated great impact in shaping a new form of news on WeChat. A particular style of news report influenced by digital culture has emerged on WeChat, further shifting the newsrooms’ practices. However, it is worth noting that even on WeChat, the social media platform that was used extensively to reach users, communication was mostly one-way. Subscribers received the preselected news at a time chosen by the journalists. It would be fair to say that all three newspapers were still largely following a conventional We-Publish-You-Read model, to borrow a term from Boczkowski.

Chapter 4: Pursuing Digitization in the Newsrooms



Figure 4.11 A journalist coordinates with his team on site during a live stream.

This photo shows a video journalist at *The Kaiping News* coordinating with his team during a live stream. In the absence of a permanent workstation, he sets up all the necessary equipment at the conference table of the newsroom. The black box behind the screen is the key equipment needed to receive the signal and transmit it online. He is using the laptop to control transmission, while communicating with his team over the phone and monitoring the live broadcast on his iPad.

This scene showcases the provisional nature that I observed in the newsroom's approach to implementing new technologies into daily practices. As this chapter will show, while the three newsrooms engaged in exploratory activities using new tools and platforms, these experimental projects were mostly driven by personal interest and beliefs. Without a structure in the organization to support the teams, these projects relied heavily on personal investment and temporary settings and were therefore difficult to sustain. More broadly, it also reflected the contingency of digitization at the three news organizations. Without a consistent strategy, this kind of temporary setting was common as newsrooms reacted to the changing market.

As mentioned in the second chapter, the digital wave reached China after it had already rolled over the Western media, whose plight, to some extent, offered Chinese media examples to learn from. By following Western experiences, Chinese media headed into the process of digitization. While sharing certain similarities with the West, however, the transformation of Chinese media organizations took place in a different social reality with unique challenges. In the Chinese case, the dual-track media system, an immature but booming market, and the media's ambivalent relationship with the state all influenced each organization's own path. In addition, the lack of a coherent professional ideology and a public without a strong tradition of news consumption further complicated the transition (Wang and Sparks, "Chinese Newspaper Groups"). Even within China, approaches to digitization are far from unified. The three digital newspapers under study departed from a similar position, and yet their situations differ greatly today. In order to fully understand the interconnection between new technologies and media practices, an investigation into the ways in which various social powers influence the adoption of new technologies in each newsroom bears great significance. Therefore, this dissertation will move on to an analysis of the social factors affecting the integration of new technology in each newsroom, examining how that integration plays into the daily activities of these three newspapers. Instead of going into the fine details of the various interactions among agents (as in ANT analysis), this study adopts a social constructivist view towards the practices at these three Chinese newsrooms. This approach is also helpful in moving beyond the particularity of each circumstance to potentially contribute to an international discussion across nations.

This chapter will first review the dominant views regarding the relationship between technology and media production, presenting the different lenses through which online news production is investigated. An analysis of the practices at the three Chinese newspapers from a social constructivist perspective follows. My study focuses on the role that political power, economic considerations, and organizational contingency play in shaping newsmaking practices. While the party continued to apply strict censorship to news production, its control mechanism was updated to include sponsoring commercial media in their digitization ventures to better assist the delivery of the party's message. At the same time, each newspaper's financial situation and organizational culture were the most direct agents in influencing the application of new technology. Despite social constraints, experimental projects were undertaken, offering a vivid display of the potential of new technology. However, these projects have yet to be incorporated into work routines, putting their sustainability into question. Although each section of this chapter focuses on one specific factor and its impact on digitization, I understand technology and other social agents as co-players in the newsroom setting, and the actual outcomes were subject to the configuration of different powers at that time.

4.1. Media and Technology: Networks

To fully understand the influence of technology on the evolution of news media, asking "what is technology?" and "what role does it play in the journalistic milieu?" is crucial. In its most popular usage, technology is understood as "a constructed and useful thing" (Slack and Wise 110). This definition understands technology as consisting of isolated objects with discrete boundaries and emphasizes these objects' role as tools while highlighting the importance of human purpose and

action. However, technology also bears cultural significance apart from its materiality; it is connected “to the values, feelings, beliefs, affects, institutions and practices that constitute everyday life” in multiple ways (Slack and Wise 9). Therefore, Slack and Wise guide us to think about “technological culture” rather than “technology and culture” to underscore their interconnectedness.

This nuanced account of technology can be traced in scholars’ interpretations of the influence of technology on journalism. Communication scholars have long examined the role technology has played in the history of media with a broad view of its relation to institutional developments in the media, the production of messages, and social transitions (Kielbowicz 1). Innis emphasizes the biases of technology and the social impact of networks, while Carey highlights the influence that technologies have on ideology by unveiling the relations between telegraphy and the concept of objectivity, print journalism, and even capitalism. Recent work on online news production commonly adopts a social constructivist perspective, demonstrating that “material and nonmaterial elements originate, endure, and decay as a result of situated and interrelated processes of construction” (Boczkowski 9). From this point of view, technology is conceptualized as a material object that can be manipulated as well as a cultural object with embedded ideas and values, which affects news production by interacting with other agents in play. Studies focus on the complex role of technology and its relationship with human actors, seeking to show how journalism and technology mutual shape each other instead of tracing a relatively unilateral causality (Anderson, *Rebuilding the News*; Batsell; Boczkowski; Boyer; Braun; Rodgers).

As objects that are subject to human action, new technologies are integrated into a given media organization through ongoing processes shaped by both local contingencies and the materiality of the technologies. To refute technological-determinist arguments, scholars highlight the significance of local context, contingent factors—such as newsroom culture, resource availability, and the political economy of organizations—and the public in determining to what degree the potential of new technology can be elaborated. For example, Boczkowski found the relationship with the print newsroom, the definition of the editorial function, and the representation of the public pertinent in shaping innovation paths (13). Brannon assessed the obstacles to developing multimedia journalism at three major US media organizations in the early days of internet news, finding too few staff, ill-equipped workers, and market and organizational challenges behind the difficulties (109).

Meanwhile, studies also show that the materiality of technology also resists human actions (Anderson and Kreiss; Boczkowski; Boyer; Rodgers; Usher). As Boczkowski argues, material “matters are central in the motives and practices of the actors making news online” (103). Professionals’ complaints about the constraints of technological affordances that limit their options are well documented. Also, new skills are required to fulfill daily tasks, modifying the standard of expertise. It is undeniable that technological artifacts do, to a degree, determine the conditions under which news is made. As Rodgers indicates, technological objects such as software are both a product of the world and a form of “secondary agency” that does work in the world. It is thus equally important to attend to how technology “produces conditions of possibility for journalism practices at trans-local scales” (20).

What’s more, to analyze the role of technology through the lens of culture also requires an understanding of the effects that it generates on actors’ consciousness in relation to newsmaking.

On the micro level, technological considerations regarding the implementation of infrastructure or the form of the news often turn out to be closely associated with ideas such as the perception of the audience, professional identity, and beliefs about the potential for innovation. For example, Braun's study of the design of MSNBC.com's online interface demonstrates that "the improvisational nature of organizational activities, and the various interests, values, and assumptions they must accommodate are often etched into the design of the technical artifacts they use and produce" (28). On the macro level, technology contests journalism's symbolic system, raising questions regarding the definition of news and the profession. While current studies often argue for the persistence of journalistic touchstones, Mosco warns that a new technology's social impacts can be hard to discern when it becomes banal (19). That is to say, it is crucial to pay attention to the emergence of new norms and their influence as new technologies continue to penetrate the journalistic milieu. For example, Rodgers emphasizes the ways in which software objects encourage "computational thinking" (21). He noticed that professional journalists increasingly felt comfortable and confident in their emerging multi-platform situation, to the extent that the threat of technology was no longer an issue. Technological innovation is becoming "less and less a foreign object, more and more a silent appliance of journalism work" (22). More importantly, now immersed in various new forms of content online, how is the way the public interacts with and understands news changing? And how could this shift further impact professionals' ways of doing their work?

Anderson ("Towards a Sociology") suggests six lenses to investigate the newly emergent computational journalism from a sociological perspective. On the political and public policy level, bureaucratic and policy initiatives need to be studied before moving on to consider political structures that might eventually lead to comparative studies across different nations. Economic analysis focuses on "the relationship between economic resources and computational journalism," which is a practical question to look into given the financial difficulties that many media organizations are facing (1012). The field perspective includes other social institutions and investigates how particular field homologies create and recreate different distributions of financial, cultural, and symbolic power inside journalism (1017). The organizational approach takes account of routines and other organizational particularities in the adoption of new technologies (ibid). The cultural history lens looks at the interactions between practitioners and technological objects against the backdrop of larger symbolic systems and patterns of belief (ibid). And finally, the technological perspective advocates an understanding of technology on its own terms (1016). That is to say, the materiality of technology and its effects in determining the working conditions of journalism need to be examined. However, the cultural aspect can hardly be excluded on this level. For example, the journalistic values that are embedded in the design need to be taken into consideration when looking at a technological object. Anderson acknowledges "tremendous overlap" among these approaches and encourages researchers to combine these lenses based on the questions they intend to address (1017).

This study adopts this social constructionist perspective on digital news and examines the interactions that happen in the three newsrooms through a sociological approach. While a newsroom study certainly requires an organizational lens, I take the wider political, economic, and cultural contexts surrounding media transition into account in an effort to move beyond the particularity of each case. In so doing, the rest of this chapter will demonstrate the way different social powers interact with technology in the process of making online news. Each section emphasizes the relationship between the technological innovation and a specific social power, and each might carry different levels of significance in different media organizations. In a second step,

all these aspects are taken into consideration to try to understand online newsmaking practices in China as a whole. Again, all social agents are perceived as players in the field who constantly compete to practice their agency. It is equally necessary to point out that this chapter does not attempt to cover every detail of the newsmaking process; instead, it highlights the factors found to be most pertinent.

4.2. Political Forces: The Ideological Goal and Ambivalent Approaches

Media practitioners view digitization as a transition in their professional practices in response to the crisis brought by social media, while the CCP's concern is first and foremost ideological (Wang and Sparks, "Chinese Newspaper Groups"; Yin and Liu). Facilitating the development of the media while remaining in control of online discourse is a delicate act. In attempting this feat, the party employed different approaches with various outcomes. While still imposing limits on the content, some of the approaches produced positive effects for the media's embrace of new technologies. However, the long tradition of political control remains the supreme constraint in media practice. At the same time, the party has also benefited from the new technology in upgrading its control mechanism.

4.2.1. Censorship

It was the first day of my visit at *Pengpai*. I was in the small room which had been transformed into the headquarters for the live broadcast section. Along with one table filled with different equipment and four tables arranged into two rows, a foldable bed had made its way into the already packed office, serving as testament to the team's heavy workload. But that afternoon was quiet, at least at the beginning. Wearing a skincare face mask, the editor was teaching two young directors how to use the content management system (CMS) to edit and update the text that went along with the live images. She was the indispensable person behind each live broadcast, and she said her skin was irritated from long hours spent in front of the screen and late nights. The team director wanted to train the directors so they could share her workload.

But the training was cut short because of a breaking event. A press conference about the heated trade war between China and the US was set to begin in half an hour, and *Pengpai* decided to carry it live. The editor rushed to set up the page; the two directors had the equipment ready and tested the signals. But several minutes into the press conference, the live stream had still not begun. The chief editor kept checking his phone anxiously, eventually deciding to call his superior to ask, "Can we go now?"

Finally, the green light.

I waited until the press conference was finished to ask why they had waited at the beginning. I was told that the *Xinhua News Agency* had initially decided to broadcast the press conference and share their signal with *Pengpai*, but they decided not to cover it at the last minute. *Pengpai* had

access to a video stream from the *Associated Press* as a backup, but *Xinhua*'s retreat was seen as a sign indicating a negative attitude on the side of the state, which made them hesitate. After verifying that there was no reporting ban, *Pengpai* went on with its plan. But the editor remained prudent when editing the text due to the sensitivity of the issue. She followed updates on China.com.cn, a website run by the State Council Information Office, to make sure that *Pengpai*'s report aligned with the political agenda.

The team's handling of the event illustrates a typical negotiation between daily newsmaking activities and state censorship. As explained in Chapter 2, despite a diversification of the content outside party propaganda since commercialization, a growing sense of professionalism among journalists, and an opening toward critical reporting, political control is still a prominent feature of Chinese media. Journalists are conscious of the party line and do not take risks. It is a widely accepted practice to use the talking points prepared by the authorities to avoid any conflicts, and adhering to the official agenda for this kind of high-stakes event is common sense. The space for independence largely depends on the policy at the time, demonstrating a swing pattern over the years. The media's relationship with censorship has followed a similar trend as digital technology gradually settled in the field. As journalists, online users, and the state all try to benefit from the new tools to fulfill their own goals, the way the media interact with censorship continues to shift. The sense that the media in China could be steered towards a democratic model was at its peak in the years following the advent of social media in 2009. With the state's control system falling behind technological advancements, some potential effects of Web 2.0 worked in favour of a more active public sphere online, such as an increase in the speed of information dissemination and the possibility that everyone with internet access could publish. Journalists were able to push for transparency and increased autonomy in critical reporting. However, new tools of control have become available as the state authority continues to update its control mechanism.

Professionals at all three newspapers confirmed that control had tightened in the past few years. My observation shows that in addition to the traditional mechanisms that had long been established within media organizations, a new net of surveillance made possible by new technology is now taking hold. In most Western newsrooms, digital technology has been found to favour a flatter organizational structure. As Le Cam and Domingo point out,

The pressure of immediacy has shaped the structure of online newsrooms, with drastic implications for gatekeeping workflow. The work in shifts, to maximize the number of hours of continuous updates of the website, thins the layers of editorial oversight and thematic specialization in the news production process. Hierarchies and unwritten editorial guidelines still exist, but gatekeeping decisions are less bound to a robust structure (sections, meetings) and more to a fluid combination of news wire dependency, individual decision making, sometimes inconsistent managerial oversight, shared story development, and audience popularity statistics. (132)

In contrast, all three newspapers in this study kept the traditional system of supervision in the shift to online news production. The three/four review system (三/四审制, San/Si Shen Zhi) requires a news piece to pass through at least three levels of review before publication, usually by the journalist, his or her superior, and the editor-in-charge. However, adjustments had been made to accelerate this process in pursuit of immediacy. For example, the power of control was more decentralized at *Pengpai* than at the other two digital newspapers. *Pengpai*'s CMS charged the

chief-editor of each section with the responsibility of professional and ideological verification. Only in the case of topics that were particularly sensitive would a fourth person, usually a high-ranking editor, be asked to review. *The Kaiping News* accelerated processing by delaying the fourth review. The app chief would simultaneously push the news online and send a review request to the high-ranking editor on duty through the publishing system. Should any modification need to be made, the editor on duty could pull back the news directly. At *The Yunnan Daily*, two senior editors usually made the decision in place of the director, who worked in a separate office and was seldom involved in daily operations. But it is necessary to mention that the journalists at the party newspaper were usually more conscious of political rules, and furthermore the news they worked on had already passed review by the print staff who dealt with the issue on a daily basis. Moreover, media organizations are also held responsible for the comments published on their platforms, adding one more procedure to the review process. All three newspapers reviewed the audience's comments before making them publicly viewable, overshadowing the user's participation.

Meanwhile, the modification of this review process came with a computerized censoring system. Sophisticated algorithms are employed to monitor online speech and prevent any content with sensitive words from being published. These online surveillance systems can quickly pick up any trending events and identify the level of risk for officials to review. Once deemed sensitive, an order would be distributed immediately. As a result, some of the "guerrilla tactics" employed by investigative journalists, such as racing against censorship,³³ have become more difficult in the digital age. For example, one of *Pengpai's* journalists confirmed with me that they had a WeChat group called "Notice" (通告, Tong Gao) to deliver requirements from the information office without delay. Moreover, journalists found that digital information is much easier to erase compared to print news. Even if they got the news out before the ban arrived, it could be retrieved easily and deleted permanently. For instance, *Pengpai* pushed a piece of news about possible abuses involving a four-year-old boy. The original report contained information gathered by a local journalist and from a video circulating on social media. Two hours later, everything had been deleted. Instead, a press release from the police department had taken the story's place and that was the only information I could find online. The nature of technology artifacts as tools is fully on display here. Although digital technology initially provided an opportunity for more freedom, it was also effectively used as a tool of control.

Interestingly, the journalists found the print newspaper more advantageous in this regard. *Pengpai* has previously used its print outlet—the *Oriental Morning Post*, which had already ceased publication at that time—to publish a critical report about the coal industry in north China instead of its digital platform (Peter et al. 506). The reason for this was the journalists knew it would be banned, and they wanted to make sure the news would leave a trace. The journalists explained, "if the report was published in the paper, it would survive and be archived in a library for future reference by historians; but once a story was censored on the website, it simply disappears without

³³ In the case of a breaking event that is sensitive to a certain extent but there is no clear rule to forbid its reporting, the media would sometimes publish it first before a gag order had been issued. In the print age, it took time for the information office to react to the event and deliver an order. That delay gave the media a window of opportunity to get the news out. (For a detailed explanation of guerrilla tactics, see Tong, "Guerrilla Tactics of Investigative Journalists in China," *Investigative Journalism in China*.)

leaving any trace” (ibid).

4.2.2. The CCP’s Initiative in Pushing Digitization

While exercising a high level of control over news production, the party is also a major driver of its digitization. It is true that the party’s actions were mainly ideological, and they remained passive in the face of rapid changes during the early stages of media digitization. But party strategy has become more proactive in recent years, providing an opportunity for the media to move ahead with the otherwise difficult task of digitization. As discussed in the second chapter, the digitization process of newspapers took a critical turn around 2013 partly due to the CCP’s push for comprehensive media convergence. On the one hand, the party urged media organizations to ramp up their efforts to move online by giving key speeches and issuing policies. On the other hand, the CCP engaged directly in experimental projects to explore new forms of propaganda in light of the changing communication dynamic. For example, the party cooperated with media organizations to explore new strategies in order to set an example for others to follow. The birth of *Pengpai* was one of these projects. As Peter et al. describe it, the project was the result of an “unlikely encounter” between the *Oriental Morning Post*, which was in crisis, and the newly formed Cyberspace Administration, who was looking for allies (500). This cooperation granted *Pengpai* the political capital needed to pursue national coverage of current events as well as the financial support necessary for a costly transformation. As one journalist said in our interview, “The success of *Pengpai* is closely connected with the government’s support. Other media wish to create another *Pengpai*, but I believe the momentum is no longer there” (personal interview, May 27, 2018).

Meanwhile, the CCP also works through state-sponsored tasks to explore new forms of news to push forward its ideological agenda. This approach takes place on a smaller scale but more frequently, whenever there is a particular theme that the media needs to promote. One of the journalists I interviewed at *Pengpai* had recently worked on a project to promote patriotism, launched by the State Information Office, in which multiple media organizations participated. The journalist shared his experience,

We wanted to reach a balance between propaganda and the type of products that are welcomed by the audience. We’ve seen work from other legacy newspapers, most of which were mainly traditional text and photo reports. A media organization in Zhejiang province made an interactive game. When it was our turn, we wanted to experiment with something new. So we made a music video, using lyrics and dance to deliver the information. (personal interview, May 29, 2018)

To make the product more appealing to its audience, the *Pengpai* team borrowed from popular culture and produced a music video,³⁴ a dramatic change from *Pengpai*’s regular reporting. The CCP’s initiative played a positive role in innovation in this case. Propaganda duty aside, the journalist saw it as a win-win situation: it was an opportunity for them to explore and experiment with a new form of work while the party’s values were publicized. He admitted that *Pengpai* had taken part in quite a few similar tasks, and usually they were not allowed to talk about them. In his

³⁴ See: https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2090632

opinion, the relationship between *Pengpai* and the Information Office is an “elastic” one without clear boundaries, where each party has the chance to gain and is in constant negotiation with the other (ibid).

The experience at *The Yunnan Daily* further demonstrates this flexibility, showing that political control could influence media production in different ways. The newly constructed command center and the privileged position of the app team at the newspaper were responses to the CCP’s call to advance media digitization and regain ideological control. However, as Yin and Liu explain, these projects merely represent the politics of making a public gesture of intent to embrace digital media while, in reality, the political safety of the party newspaper’s leadership is far more important than bringing real changes to media practices (569-570). As a result, local political power is a key player in shaping newspapers’ newsmaking practices. In the case of *The Yunnan Daily*, the local government’s battle against political corruption and the personalities of the current provincial leaders had an immense impact on their reporting. As explained by one of the senior editors,

Since the issue of the Eight Regulations,³⁵ all news concerning the governor and party secretary of the province could only use text and small photos, not even a large photo display. However, we still managed to improve the quality of our news greatly between 2014 and 2016. I can say honestly that our work was even better than those of the *People’s Daily*. But our current governor prefers to keep a low profile to avoid any problems. There is very little we

³⁵ The Eight Regulations, commonly known as Ba Xiang Gui Ding (八项规定) were put forward by President Xi Jinping at the Politburo meeting of the CCP in December 2014. Aimed at regulating the corruption, the eight rules prohibit ostentation and extravagance and limit official’s public exposure. These are:

1. Leaders must maintain close contact with the grassroots. Inspection tours which are a mere formality should be strictly prohibited. For official visits, there should be no welcome banner, no red carpet, no floral arrangement or grand receptions for officials.
2. Meetings and major events should be strictly regulated, and their efficiency improved. Politburo members are not allowed to attend ribbon-cutting or cornerstone-laying ceremonies, or celebrations and seminars, unless they get approval from the Central Committee. Official meetings should be shortened, be specific and to-the-point, and be free of empty-talk and blather.
3. The issuing of official documents should be reduced.
4. Officials’ visits to foreign countries should only be arranged when absolutely necessary, with fewer accompanying members; on most occasions, there is no need to mobilize a reception by Chinese expatriates, institutions and students at the airport.
5. There should be fewer traffic controls when leaders travel by car to avoid unnecessary inconvenience to the public.
6. The media should seek to reduce the number of news reports related to members of the Politburo, their work and their activities. The media should also seek to reduce the amount of time spent on these news pieces and minimize their scope. Such stories should only be reported depending on work needs, news value, and potential social impact.
7. Leaders should not publish any works by themselves or issue any congratulatory letters in their own name unless an arrangement has been made with the central authorities. Official documents without much meaningful content and without much actual importance should be withheld. Publications dedicated to senior officials’ work and activities are also restricted.
8. Leaders must practice thrift and strictly follow relevant regulations on accommodation and cars.

can do. (personal interview, May 29, 2019)

That being said, apart from the party leadership's direct guidance and control over the development of media organizations, other political forces might also play a part. The country's traditional view on information control is still persistent, especially at the local level. As a result, local governments are more cautious in innovating their control mechanism, which therefore leaves less space for the media's exploratory practices because of their pursuit of stability. Similarly, the low level of transparency in general in Chinese society poses a clear barrier for some data-driven practices like data journalism. *Pengpai's* team confirmed that their work remained largely explanatory, such as "The History of Manned Spaceships" and "How Do Text-matching Platforms Identify Plagiarism." The kind of reports based on a large amount of data collection and analysis that we find in Western media were rarely seen in China because of the lack of access to data (personal interview, April 9, 2018). But it is necessary to acknowledge that negotiating the clash between the state and newsmaking is not a daily practice for everyone. Most news production at *Pengpai* was in the safe zone; there was much less discussion about control at *The Kaiping News* because the news it produced was largely not political. Journalists' performance in these fields reveals other factors at play, for example, concerns about revenue, a lack of organizational support, etc. Needless to say, self-censorship factors in at all times on a more covert level, especially at party newspapers like *The Yunnan Daily*.

4.3. Economy: Under the Shadow of the Economic Crisis

It was the weekly editing meeting at the *Chun Cheng Evening Post*, the parent newspaper of *The Kaiping News*. Around 20 people were present: mostly the senior editors from the print newsroom. The head of the online newsroom was absent, as usual, because he found the meeting unhelpful for his department. He sent the director of the app team instead. During this week's meeting, the education-beat journalists presented a public relations business plan for an international high school. The plan included a special print issue and a video for the client. The chief editor gave the project her full approval, indicating to the team to "go on with full steam, even at the cost of slowing down on your daily reporting duty" (editorial meeting, May 14, 2019).

Seeing that the plan did not involve the online platform, one of the high-ranking editors who was supervising the digital outlet raised a concern over the journalists' lack of consideration for digital production. In his opinion, the project was a good opportunity for the newspaper to showcase its digital platform to their advertising clients as well as to expand its audience among families with school-age children. Despite these comments, the print journalists resisted the participation of the online team. The senior editor then took this chance to urge the print journalists to put more efforts into promoting the digital outlet. He also took issue with the newspaper's leadership, highlighting the fact there was no guidance in terms of the form or price for digital advertising and nor was there a policy to motivate the staff to promote the digital outlet on the organizational level.

This episode gives a glimpse into the struggling economic situation at *The Kaiping News*. To understand the tension between the print and online teams, it is necessary to understand the

relationship between the editorial and business sides of the organization as well as its remuneration structure. What happened during the meeting reveals some concerning effects of the economic pressure that news organizations had been under since commercialization. In pursuit of economic profit, the *CCWB* had integrated its business activities into the newsroom. Newsroom staff were encouraged to engage directly with potential clients and would be remunerated for the business they brought in. This arrangement might be alarming to a Western reader, but it is actually a common practice among Chinese media organizations. Studies have documented that journalists were often paid for bringing in advertising revenue, and even after the CCP campaigned for the separation of editorial and advertising, various problematic practices remain generally accepted (Wang and Sparks, “Marketing Credibility”; Zhao, *Communication in China*). As Wang and Sparks state, “there was never such a strongly marked boundary between commercial and editorial sphere” (1303).

This arrangement further compromised newsmaking activities as the newspaper’s economic health started to deteriorate as companies transferred their advertising spend to online platforms, raising profound questions regarding the quality of news and the ethics of the profession. The steep loss of advertising revenue led to a decrease in journalists’ salaries, which further translated into a widely shared anxiety over the future of the newspaper and their personal careers. The political news office, whose journalists were considered to have a position with good pay and a stable workload, lost three senior journalists in 2017. As I witnessed in the editorial meeting, reporting was seen as something that could be compromised for the sake of advertising revenue, and the print staff was reluctant to cooperate with the online team for related financial reasons. Moreover, the chief of the online team was not able to recruit staff with the necessary knowledge of online news. He had a bitter smile on his face when he half-joked about tricking the IT team to stay at the newspaper. Clearly, this was a media organization that was deeply troubled by the economic crisis. Under pressure to increase income, economic considerations often took priority in the newspaper’s daily activities, directly affecting the integration of digital technologies.

Apart from the impact of business on editorial choices, the longstanding dispute between the online and print newsrooms regarding the selection of online news was connected to economic issues as well. It appeared to be a dispute regarding the value of news: the app team complained that the print journalists did not understand the requirements of online news, while the print journalists were unhappy about the “vague” criteria for online news selection and considered the online editors to be unprofessional. There were two reasons behind the issue. First, as mentioned before, working in the online newsroom was considered to be less desirable by the print staff. Most of the online staff arrived because the newspaper was scaling down production and their positions were eliminated. Those who remained in the print newsroom considered themselves more experienced and professional. The other factor was the organization’s remuneration system. At *The Kaiping News*, journalists’ monthly income depends on the amount and quality of the news they publish. As a result, to have their work published as much as possible was the journalists’ major goal, especially at a time when the scale of newspaper production was shrinking. This remuneration regime, established in the print era, was problematic for the online newsroom’s operation. Although the online space was unlimited in theory, the newspaper could not put all product online, “otherwise the expense would be uncontrollable” (personal interview, May 17, 2018). As my observation reveals, the way that the workload was calculated eventually contributed to print journalists’ resistance towards the digital platform. For example, while editors encouraged the journalists to write two versions of a story, one for print and another for the mobile application, most journalists

produced only one. The reason was very practical, because “it would only be counted as one article anyway” (personal interview, May 17, 2019). Moreover, journalists were less willing to work on in-depth news because producing more articles was a much more efficient way to increase income, and WeChat news was a non-starter because that workload was not recognized in the current system (personal interview, May 16, 2018). As a senior editor at *The Kaiping News* summarized, “Our journalists still work hard, but the current crisis at the newspaper is the destruction of the economic model. The question we are facing is: how to survive?” (personal interview, May 7, 2018).

The example of *The Kaiping News* shows the negative impact of financial difficulties on the media’s capacity to embrace new technologies. It was not only that decreasing revenue prevented the newsroom from recruiting personnel necessary for exploring new technologies, but even when tools and skills were available, salary concerns discouraged the print staff from engaging with online reporting. *Pengpai* had the same economic concerns but managed to overcome the crisis by cooperating with the state. It is fair to say that the relatively comfortable economic situation at *Pengpai* was favorable for technological innovation. A journalist confirmed that his salary was higher than at other media organizations, and the funding was relatively generous. As he said, “Most of the time we are free to experiment with new forms of reports. It does not have to be informative, as long as the form makes it interesting, and if we can find the technical solution, then it is ok. If we need third-party technical support, the funding would usually be granted” (personal interview, May 29, 2018). However, as mentioned earlier, *Pengpai*’s financial stability came at the price of its already limited autonomy.

The failure of the current economic model is an internationally shared challenge faced by many media organizations. But bear in mind that the Chinese media had just come through commercialization, and, for many of them, the economic structure of media organizations was very problematic to start with (*The Kaiping News* is one example), which makes the digital transformation even more challenging. Putting aside *The Yunnan Daily*, who are shielded from economic burden due to its party newspaper status, the economic situation had a direct impact on journalistic performance at the other two organizations. *The Kaiping News* is a typical example of a commercial newspaper in crisis. Economic considerations became the dominant value at the organization, taking priority over technological innovation and newsmaking practices. Wang and Sparks’s interviews across six commercially oriented newspapers further confirms this finding. Their study reveals that newspapers have adopted a much more ruthless market logic in their pursuit of the single mission of raising revenue, resulting in what they call a “vertical organization”³⁶ in which the editorial and business functions are merged (“Marketing Credibility” 1313).

On the other hand, having benefited from government funding, *Pengpai* was released from the crisis and made great progress in digitization. However, that is not to say that economic considerations had no impact on its news reporting; it is worth noting that *Pengpai* still sought advertising revenue actively. While the newspaper progressed steadily in the digitization of its

³⁶ Wang and Sparks differentiate between two kinds of organizational structures. One is the “horizontal” organization of the newspaper, in which there was a genuine separation of domains. Another one is a “vertical” orientation in which the two groups of staff, and the two functions, are merged in pursuit of the single mission of raising revenue (“Marketing Credibility” 1313).

platform and news production, the organization also channeled its journalists' skills with new tools and forms into its advertising services. While *Pengpai* maintained a separation of editorial and business activities, journalists sometimes had to take on projects passed on by their colleagues from the marketing department. For example, the group of investigative journalists known for their reporting using non-fiction writing technique were also the authors of several PR pieces. They were asked to write stories using the same writing techniques for advertising clients, and these works were published without being clearly labeled as PR. Because of *Pengpai*'s popularity and its updated advertising service, its advertising revenue was on the rise. However, as the next chapter will discuss further, such practices sparked concern among journalists about the boundary between reporting and PR. More broadly, by accepting significant public funding, *Pengpai* became an ally of the CCP in its online propaganda campaign, sacrificing the independency it once desired.

The contrast between these two commercial newspapers demonstrates an interesting turn in the role of capital in the development of the Chinese media. During commercialization, the arrival of private capital led to a flourishing in media production as well as an opening towards more autonomy, while the impact of the financial crisis in the digital era was less favourable, compromising the newsroom's ability to embrace new technologies and the quality of news. At the same time, some organizations benefited from state funding and have been more successful in digitizing, representing a rebound of political power in the journalistic field. However, the case of *The Yunnan Daily* reveals that having funding alone was not sufficient to boost digitization. On the one hand, the party newspaper's print-first approach sidelined the online newsroom; on the other, the lack of economic motivation also diminished the team's desire for exploration.

4.4. The Organization: The Newspaper-Turned-Online Outlets

One thing that I noticed almost immediately as I walked into the newsrooms was the outdated office space. From the successful *Pengpai* to the struggling *Kaiping News* to the comfy *Yunnan Daily*, there were no exceptions. The computers might have been updated, some new tools were also present, but the way the space was organized, even the décor, was fairly traditional, even outdated, as Chinese society was heading towards modernization at full steam. I did not find the modernized open space with central workstation that appears in many ethnographic studies. The contrast between the physical working space and the product of their work is strongest at *Pengpai*. While the newsroom was running one of the best online newspapers in the nation, the office appears to be a provisional arrangement. Even the signboard with the name of the newspaper on it was only hung outside the building after my visit, some four years since its foundation.

Interestingly, I find the offices familiar. What I saw was the same traditional newspaper offices from more than a decade ago, when I was still an intern walking in and out of newsrooms. While I found myself in these spaces again, talking about the changing dynamics of the profession with journalists, it made me wonder, what has really changed? Yuan Zeng describes *Pengpai* as "old wine in a new bottle," highlighting the journalists' efforts to preserve tradition. The opposite is equally true. At these three newspaper-turned-online outlets, the practitioners were also trying to fill an old bottle with new wine. While the news has taken on different forms, it is inevitably shaped by the history of the organization and its culture as a print newspaper.

4.4.1. Bureaucracy: The Power of the Ling Dao

What I witnessed in the three newsrooms could partly be explained by the newspaper's traditional role as a party organ. It is essential to remember that although newspapers like *Pengpai* and *The Kaiping News* have taken on commercial status, they remain state-owned companies. That is to say, the leadership is subject to government appointment, and bureaucratic culture is usually more entrenched compared to private organizations. As Yin and Liu explained, unlike the professionals who run news organizations in the West, the viewpoint of a Chinese press's leadership is more politically oriented, having almost nothing to do with its performance in media convergence (569). These high-ranking officials, commonly referred to as the Ling Dao (领导), seldom engaged in routine reporting practices,³⁷ but journalists were conscious of the significant power they held over the future of the organization and individual careers. The Ling Dao's preferences played a vital role in major strategic decisions regarding digitization.

My observation shows that the digital technology that was believed to favour a flatter power structure did have an impact on the division of power at newspapers. All three newspapers showed signs of decentralization. Most editorial decisions were made between a journalist and his or her immediate superior, who was granted the power to sign off on the story. However, while power was more divergent at the middle level, the high-ranking managing staff still held great power in key matters. I was surprised when I found out that *Pengpai* was relatively conservative in employing new technologies in the newsmaking process such as algorithms. It did not run a customized front page, the newsroom did not have a database to collect news sources, and the Web traffic metrics were not regularly analyzed by IT staff. The only report that I have seen on *Pengpai*'s users and their behaviour was done by a third-party research institution in 2017. *Pengpai* branded itself as being at the vanguard of media convergence, and it certainly had the financial means to recruit personnel and invest in infrastructure. Still, these technologies that were usually considered to be essential for online news were absent. I posed the question to multiple people on different occasions, and the answer was highly consistent: our Ling Dao did not think that it was important. Similarly, *The Yunnan Daily*'s mobile application was developed three years ago, but "we (the online newsroom) do not have the right to update. That would need to go through a multi-level application procedure" (personal interview, May 29, 2018).

Compared to *Pengpai* and *The Yunnan Daily*, *The Kaiping News* was more open to new technology. It was the only organization where IT staff worked alongside the journalists in the newsroom. One section in its app carried customized content (although the actual effect was limited because there was not enough content to choose from), and the newsroom had developed a database to collect news sources and to analyze Web traffic. Moreover, while the other two organizations were reluctant to share statistics, *The Kaiping News* ran an open-access website to display their data. I was able to trace this openness to one person: the chief-editor of the newsroom. "He had the mindset of an IT guy," a high-ranking editor joked (personal interview, May 14, 2018). However,

³⁷ It is necessary to acknowledge that the majority of them do have experience in journalism but stopped practicing once they started to pursue a political career.

while he was able to make certain decisions regarding the online newsroom by himself, his strong ambition to reform the online newsroom and innovate the platform was thwarted by the hesitation of the newspaper's leadership. For example, he could not recruit appropriately skilled online journalists but had to take on staff that the print newsroom no longer needed. He also had little say in deciding which projects the online team could participate in. Most importantly, he had to constantly adjust his plans because of the newspaper's inconsistent strategy. I could sense his frustration when he complained that,

The Ling Dao does not have a clear view [towards the digitization], they kept changing ideas. We could have been expanding rapidly last year [2017], but the plan was delayed because of the leadership change. There is going to be another managing personnel adjustment this year, when would this end? (personal interview, May 8, 2018).

His is not alone in this view: "efficiency at the organization is low, slowing down the execution of any plan," a senior editor echoed (personal interview, May 29, 2018).

4.4.2. The Remnant of the Newspaper

Pengpai, *The Kaiping News*, and *The Yunnan Daily* share the same background: they were all once—some still are—print newspapers. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the three digital outlets were still affected by the culture of print to a certain degree. The most extreme case would be *The Yunnan Daily*, where the print newspaper was and likely will remain the core product of the organization. There, the online newsroom was seen as a supplement and had little power over print practices. But even at *Pengpai* and *The Kaiping News*, where online news production was considered to be a strategic priority, the legacy of the print newsroom still played a crucial role in its online newsmaking practices. Examined closely, certain organizational issues, such as newsroom structure, inconsistency between print and online workflows, and organizational policy, are found to be pertinent in shaping the newsmaking process.

All three newsrooms were structured in a traditional way based on the practice of a print newspaper. The print newsrooms were initially divided by fields of coverage, and beat reporters were assigned to follow up exclusively. Eventually, the journalists accrued many sources over the years, which they took as their most important asset. At the same time, they were used to working independently and organized their work schedules based on the requirements of textual reporting. The online newsrooms were structured differently, organized by areas of expertise and requiring cooperation among journalists. These structural differences led to incompatible workflows and conflicts between online and print staff.

To use *Pengpai* as an example, it was by then an online-only newspaper, but the organization was the result of a merger between the Visual Center, i.e., the original *Pengpai* team, and the print newsroom of the *Oriental Morning Post*. There were neither major lay-offs³⁸ nor a profound

³⁸ A portion of the staff has the status of public employees, meaning they have a permanent contract.

organizational reform after the newspaper ceased to publish. Instead, the structure of the print newsroom was largely kept intact and continued to operate in parallel to the digital newsroom. In theory, the Visual Center, as the main producer of multimedia, had two roles: one was to cooperate with the print newsroom by providing technical support, and the other was to produce reports independently. But in practice, cooperation was difficult due to the inconsistency between print and online newsmaking and the resistance of print journalists who remained in control of the sources.

Multiple online editors talked about this difficulty:

It would be ideal if the journalists communicated with us about their initial ideas and we made a plan together, then they went on to do the interview and filming. But at most times the print journalists do not understand that. They only communicate with us after the interview. (multimedia producer, personal interview, April 4, 2018)

I used to attend the editorial meeting in an effort to look for potential cooperation opportunities, but it was not very effective. Because most reports presented in the meeting are already in the final stage of production, which is too late for us to join in. Now I prefer to work with several specific teams that I am familiar with, such as environmental news, *Pengpai* research, and financial news.” (data journalist, personal interview, April 9, 2018)

As a matter of fact, online editors at all three newsrooms talked about the need to include multimedia considerations at an earlier stage in news production, but they acknowledged that the journalists were more used to their traditional workflow, wherein format was not given much thought. They still considered adding multimedia elements to be similar to layout editing in the newspaper age, which only happened after their work was done. In general, print and digital journalists took pride in their own forms of expertise and their differences were hard to reconcile, as each considered the other unprofessional and lacking understanding of the importance of their work:

I usually work alone. There has been very little cooperation, maybe once every half year. The reports are mainly in text. I know that short video is trendy now, but it does not work for every story. Text is more suitable for a lot of subjects.³⁹ Moreover, it is more complicated to produce video; it is easier to work by myself. There were some cases where I was asked to shoot a video, but that was not my goal, I only wanted to write an investigative story. Of course, I would do it when I am asked, but I don't think these videos carry any useful information. (investigative reporter, personal interview, April 10, 2019)

Our working pace is different from that of the print journalists, and this is only one problem. The most important one is that they do not understand visual language. To take one shot as an example, I would zoom in, but they would start directly. For me, this shot would be useless. But they do not understand. In their mind, as long as they have it in the camera, it is fine. (video journalist, personal interview, April 10, 2019)

Text and video are two different ways of thinking. For example, a print journalist asked me to

³⁹ The journalist was talking about investigative reporting in this case.

film something I considered useless, but he said “just do what I ask you to do.” We are naturally incompatible; it is impossible to communicate. (video journalist, personal interview, April 12, 2018)

It is not unusual for journalists in the same newsrooms to have different opinions, but what is more critical was the lack of organizational efforts to facilitate cooperation. Instead, some policies were even put in place to keep different groups at a distance to avoid conflicts. For example, each team could only publish in the sections they were authorized to, and particular guidelines were given for them to follow. A chief-editor of the video team at *Pengpai* confirmed that they were only allowed to make video reports, although she would have preferred a text-and-video approach in some circumstances. “Video journalists seldom produce text because the top-level strategy of *Pengpai* does not encourage it. As for the reason why, we have no idea” (personal interview, April 9, 2018). Moreover, the news sources were controlled by the print journalists, and the online journalists were not allowed to bypass the beat reporter should an interview be necessary. Therefore, it was not easy for the online journalists to carry out independent work either. They had to “ask a favour” from their print colleagues or even to file a paper application. It would be fair to say that despite *Pengpai*’s digital-only strategy, textual practices remained dominant, and multimedia reporting was considered to be in a secondary position. Technology was seen as an add-on to the work of newsmaking instead of a new way to produce it. In the absence of any organizational effort to alter the existing newsroom structure and workflow, the journalists had to resort to their personal networks. However, such efforts were provisional and unsustainable in the long term.

Disagreement between the print and online teams was even stronger at *The Kaiping News* due to ambivalence over digital reform at the organizational level. Despite the fact the importance of the online platform was acknowledged, organizational efforts to put that into practice were not adequate. The print newspaper remained the priority in daily work, and there was no organizational policy, whether economic or administrative, to encourage print journalists to move online. It was evident that the goal of digitization was not aligned within the organization and the digital newsroom not properly supported as a result. There was a clear gap in terms of the journalists’ strategic vision for the newspaper’s future. While the online staff emphasized the importance of having a “digital sense” and looked for a role based on the mobile application’s functions beyond a conventional journalistic paradigm, the print journalists maintained their own expertise, arguing that, “Ultimately our strength is the interview and the report. We do not have much advantage in building a new [digital] platform—we started late already” (personal interview, May 17, 2018). Consequently, working in the digital newsroom was seen as a less desirable job because of its disadvantageous position in the organization and uncertain future. Quite a few editors were former copyeditors or photographers whose work was no longer necessary for the print newspaper, while most capable journalists either remained in the print newsroom because they considered working in the online newsroom “a hard job,” or they left the newspaper altogether. For example, *The Kaiping News* was the only digital newsroom that still had copyeditors. The director of the online newsroom also claimed that the source of the dispute between the two newsrooms was the lack of capable professionals in the online team. As he complained,

The managers put them here because print had scaled down its production. But from the point of view of the online news, I don’t need them. . . . The most capable journalists are still working for print, why would they listen to you [the online editors]? (personal interview, May 2, 2018).

4.5. The Experimental Projects

Up until now, this chapter has highlighted the political, economic, and organizational constraints that journalists were facing. It is worth acknowledging that despite these constraints, multiple experimental projects did go on at these three newspapers. These projects aimed to explore the options for newsmaking made available by new tools, showcasing the effects of technology despite contextual limitations. Of course, the complexity of these projects ranged widely according to the resources available at each newsroom. What they had in common was that this kind of exploratory work was usually spontaneous and random, depending on the passion and professional skill of the individual journalist. Without any organizational effort to motivate and routinize these experiments, they were hard to reproduce. However, these small-scale initiatives did play a positive role, opening up spaces for new tools and new forms of reporting in the newsrooms.

Pengpai was the most active in this regard thanks to their generous funding. They produced the first Web documentary made by a Chinese media organization; one multimedia project has won several awards over the years for its use of data journalism and interactive narrative; and a team co-produced a series of videos with their audience. Journalists who participated in these projects talked about two main difficulties they had to tackle. First, this kind of work was outside the newsroom's daily work purview but was very time-consuming because of its experimental nature. Relying on personal passion to fulfill these tasks might not be sustainable in the long term. What's more, these projects usually operated under a project manager model, but the hierarchy of the newsroom complicated the work of the team leader, who was not necessarily the highest-ranking journalist on the team. As one project manager explained,

Assuming that I am the project manager, in theory, I take the lead and make the decisions, should it be necessary. But if someone from another department outranks me, then it would be awkward [for me to make a request]. (personal interview, April 9, 2018)

That being said, the journalist's curiosity and interest in exploring a new tool as well as the personal charm of the team leader were proven to be key to these innovations. To use the words of one project manager, the report

is the result of cooperation among a group of young journalists who are interested in the project. Whether or not we could work together totally relies on the personal passion of each participant. I have been here for a long time, and they know me well, so they are willing to work with me. (personal interview, April 10, 2018)

In a similar vein, there were a few exploratory projects at *The Kaiping News* and *The Yunnan Daily*. Although these projects took place at a smaller scale and might be less experimental compared to *Pengpai*'s pioneering projects, the individual efforts were equally important and therefore worth acknowledging. The user behaviour database at *The Kaiping News* is one example. As I mentioned before, it is the only newsroom among the three that collects and analyzes Web metrics systematically. Thanks to the work of the newsroom director and his IT group, all the data was visualized and displayed in real time on an open-access website with the hope that it would guide the journalists' work. Similarly, a small group of video journalists formed the core of the

video news and the live broadcast teams at *Kaiping*. One photographer-turned-video-journalist shared with me his secret to a successful transition: “to love life, and to have an eye to find interesting things” (personal interview, May 20, 2018). He managed to produce one piece of video every day when no one else was interested, and now there is a dedicated page for video news in *Kaiping*’s app. Meanwhile, his colleagues managed to run the live broadcast twice a week without a fixed workspace. Not long before the live broadcast was set to start, the director would spread out his equipment on the conference table and coordinate with his team on site from there.

Meanwhile, the app team at *The Yunnan Daily* could be considered an experiment itself. As a party newspaper, a great part of its newsmaking practices were subject to political instructions. Nonetheless, the young editors at the team were actively looking for new spaces for an online party newspaper within today’s media dynamic. One field for them to explore was the WeChat news service. As a relatively new media platform, the party newspaper was less familiar with its techniques and the activities that took place there. Therefore, the online team had more leeway in producing WeChat news. For example, at one editorial meeting I attended, an online editor presented an analysis of the paper’s WeChat account in addition to the routine review of their performance the past week, including traffic, user behaviour, most-read articles, and a comparison with other major party newspapers. As explained earlier, the party newspaper did not monitor this data itself, but the editor was able to use a third-party data service. As it turned out, quite a few of the online editors were eager to get audience feedback in order to properly evaluate their own work. As such a service was unavailable within the organization, they looked elsewhere.

Recently, the team produced several experimental works on WeChat outside the newspaper’s daily reporting duty, focusing on nonpolitical content. They used soft content, e.g., local culture and seasonal sightseeing, as an opportunity for them to try out new forms of reporting, such as photo display, video, interactive narratives, and so on. But at the same time, the editors found the pace of news dissemination on social media too fast for them to think thoroughly, not to mention that the bulk of their work was to execute political orders. As one senior editor said, “We are doing the best we can under the circumstances” (personal interview, May 29, 2018).

4.6. Discussion

While studies of Western cases have offered valuable insights into the digital transformation of journalistic practices, establishing theoretical frameworks for studies of online news, the diversity found around the world is finally getting more attention. Chinese newspapers face similar challenges in their exploration of a viable future as other media organizations around the world: the rise of social media, technological innovation, and revenue loss, all while adapting to a changing social reality in China at the same time. Based on empirical evidence from three Chinese newspapers, this chapter delineated the interactions among different social powers at work in this transition. Chinese media practices, while appear to mimic Western examples on the outside, ultimately reveal key differences in terms of how each social force factors into the newsmaking process.

Despite commercialization and digitization engendering hope for a weakening of the party’s

role, it seems very likely that political forces will remain the dominant power in the development of Chinese media. Although the effect was limited, with the power of an independent economy, the commercialized media in China did gain some room to publish more diverse content, including critical reporting. With the market becoming a kind of counterpower to China's strong political control, the Chinese media field achieved a delicate balance between the professionals, the market, and the state (Wang and Sparks, "Chinese Newspaper Groups"; Zhao, "Understanding China's Media"). However, the arrival of digital technology unsettled the field once again, with different forces competing to exercise their influence in shaping the transition. After the initial opening of an online public sphere, led by the advent of social media platforms, these past few years have seen the CCP demonstrate growing interest and determination in controlling media practices. The CCP has benefited from new technologies to update its ruling mechanism, which includes the control system and propaganda techniques. At the same time, newspapers struggled to build a digital future under the shadow of dramatic revenue loss. The strong political initiative combined with weakened economic power complicated the media's efforts towards digitization and yielded space for the state to assume a stronger role by providing financial support. If we can say that commercialization contributed to the diversification of media in China and the creation of space, however limited, for liberal journalistic practices, then the current economic difficulties put all that into question. What I observed at *Pengpai* and *The Kaiping News* speaks to this shift. This finding is consistent with Wang and Sparks's analysis ("Chinese Newspaper Groups"); as they argue, the economic crisis "has entailed striking a new balance between the political and the commercial and, consequently, a new dynamic between the media, politics, and market is in formation" (95).

Threatened by economic crisis, the newsroom's economic resources greatly affect their ability to pursue digitization. At *The Kaiping News*, where the newsroom suffered the most, print journalists' willingness to embrace new technology relied largely on economic considerations. More critically, editorial decisions were more likely to be interfered with by business activities, raising further concerns regarding the quality of news and professional ethics. The situation is similar to what has been found in Western case studies where commercial pressures have reduced journalistic autonomy significantly and compromised news quality (Boyer; Phillips; Vu). *Pengpai*, on the other hand, benefited from government funding to move forward with the costly endeavour of digitization. While a comfortable economic situation contributed to its exploration of new technologies, *Pengpai* failed in its pursuit of becoming a relatively independent online newspaper with a viable economic model. Moreover, its innovative advertising services put the boundary between reporting and PR into question. Meanwhile, the case of *The Yunnan Daily* reveals that having sufficient funding was not enough to guarantee a successful digital transition. The newspaper's digital media strategy was much less aggressive than its commercial counterparts due to a lack of economic motivation and the local government's conservative approach, which led to the newspaper's print-first strategy. Given that the party's need for a print presence is unlikely to change anytime soon, the digitization of the party press would require further stimulation.

These three cases reveal a delicate relationship between political and economic power—one that is constantly shifting as the media evolves. It is clear that economic losses have made space for political power, paving the way for a more controlled media system. Given the weakened finances of the commercial media, a liberal future for Chinese media seems even further away. Wang and Sparks share similar observations regarding political and economic power in Chinese media digitization, and they argue that the shift in the power dynamic has strengthened the position of the party press ("Chinese Newspaper Groups" 111). However, I believe that within this shifting

media dynamic, the definition of the party press requires reconsideration. While the conventional party newspapers struggle with a low level of popularity among the public compared to commercial outlets, as well as other constraints as print-first organizations, another kind of party press is in formation. The commercial newspapers, such as *Pengpai*, that benefited substantially from state funding, be it a direct subsidy or indirect financial support, have become a new party organ that combines political and financial support from the state with an energized commercial market. In *Pengpai*'s case, its approach to digitization was more aggressive and effective compared to other party organs, because it had felt the threat of the commercial loss profoundly and had a better appreciation of the industry. Generous funding and an initially liberal-leaning editorial strategy contributed to the success of the digital outlet. However, as dependency on the state has gone on, *Pengpai* has recently taken on a tone that more and more resembles a party organ. As one journalist who worked on an experimental project stated bluntly, "*Pengpai* IS a Party press" (personal interview, May 29, 2018).

Apart from these political economic factors, print newspaper culture was found to be pertinent in the online newsmaking process. My observation shows that the print journalists, who remained in control of news sources, still held great power in news production. At all three newsrooms, the online journalists were often involved at a later stage of the production process and played a supportive role. Given the lack of organizational support for a deeper reform of the newsroom's structure and workflow, this tendency is unlikely to change any time soon.

However, to acknowledge these constraints is not to deny the effect of new technology. The accelerated pace, the emergence of new practices, as well as an updated censorship mechanism are all results of a transformation driven by digital technology. The various experimental projects showcased the potential of digital technology to transform journalistic practices. However, to what extent the potential of the new tools is played out is subject to the political-economic situation, as well as other organizational factors, that the media faces. Given that these digital practices have yet to be routinized, journalists' personal passions and appreciation for new technology is crucial. For the same reason, experimental projects are limited to a small scale and might be difficult to sustain in the long run without systematic changes in the newsroom. My findings also reveal that technology may carry more influence in domains that are outside the organization's control. This effect is most evident in the making of WeChat news. The fact that WeChat is a third-party platform and the media has little say in its design takes journalists out of the conventional setting of journalistic practices. They were given more leeway to explore the new tools and were more likely to take online culture into consideration. In the case of *The Yunnan Daily*, WeChat has become a space to experiment outside the well-controlled party outlets. As the media industry, as well as our society in general, grows more and more dependent on computerized tools, this effect might continue to amplify.

Thus far, the relationship between technology and major social powers in online news production has been mostly explored from an organizational perspective while taking the broad social context into consideration. In the next chapter, I will zoom in on individual journalists, looking into how their roles and their understandings of the profession are evolving in the new media dynamic.

Chapter 5: Ideologies at Work

媒体拿新闻奖，广告公司拿营销奖，原本确实是这样的，但事情正在发生变化。这恐怕是更根本的媒体转型。



1 min ago

Figure 5.12 A WeChat post by a journalist at *Pengpai*

Because of *Pengpai*'s popularity and its innovative advertising services, the organization was recognized as "Best Marketing Platform" by a Chinese survey agency focused on internet research. The figure above is the screenshot of a WeChat post by a journalist at *Pengpai* on this occasion. The text reads,

"Media win news awards while advertising companies win marketing awards, this is indeed how things used to work. However, it is changing. This is a fundamental transition for media organizations, I am afraid."

His reflection highlights one of the most important questions that many journalists are searching for an answer to during this time of media transition: *What constitutes a news organization, and what kinds of practices should it engage with?* These questions then move on to a more personal level: *what is the role of a journalist?* Having discussed the organizational dynamics at three digital newspapers and the interactions of different social forces in the context of online newsrooms, this chapter turns to individual journalists and the ideology embedded in their practices.

Up to this point, this dissertation has depicted three newsrooms under tremendous social constraints. As print-turned-online newspapers, their online practices remained under the influence of their print traditions. What's more, growing political pressure and a deteriorating economy further complicated their digitization. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that news is not only socially made but is also the result of human constructions situated within a given symbolic system. Given the shifting media dynamic, it is worth looking at what the journalists did and said at these three newsrooms to account for the values that guide their actions as well as their understanding of

the profession.

This chapter relies on classic gatekeeping theory in analyzing the journalists' ideology. What they do and how they are guided by their understandings of journalism, and, in return, their practices impact their perceptions of the profession. Some observers have suggested that current shifts in the way that people receive and transmit information will dissolve the barrier between the media and its audience and eventually lead to the disappearance of the gatekeeper role (Vos 6). However, studies show that the practice of gatekeeping—"a complex process of selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and messaging with forces across multiple levels involved" (Shoemaker et al. 73)—remains essential in framing journalists' self-definitions (Boczkowski; Boyer; Czarniawska; Paterson and Domingo). Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the practice of gatekeeping is shifting. Notions such as a multiplicity of gates (Williams and Carpini), gatewatching (Bruns), secondary gatekeeping (Singer), and post-publication gatekeeping (Hermida) have emerged to describe these changing dynamics.

In China, similar practices have emerged in response to the rise of social media platforms and changes in news consumption. For example, many of the journalists I followed repost stories they deem important on their personal social media pages. *The Kaiping News* even made a rule requiring journalists to share at least 30 news stories per month on their own WeChat pages to boost the outlet's presence on social media. However, the current situation presents different challenges to Chinese journalists compared to their Western counterparts. First, digital technology brought with it newly available resources and unlimited platforms as well as a competitive market and computerized surveillance. Second, the practitioner-audience relationship is complicated by the journalists' obligation to censor users' messages while also needing to attract their attention. It is worthwhile to look into how the gatekeeping role is changing during the digital transition and how those shifts affect journalists' perceptions of the profession.

In the following sections, I will first lay out a theoretical framework for journalistic agency and ideology and its connection to the social setting by drawing on gatekeeping theory, followed by a review of Chinese journalists' professional ideology. Although my analysis focuses on the journalist's point of view, what they say and do reflects the larger social system at play. Their discourses and actions reveal the way that social and cultural context affects journalists' practices and their ways of thinking about and understanding the profession. In the meantime, my study also highlights journalists' efforts in defining their role in practice. This study finds that journalists increasingly practice self-censorship in response to the expansion of political control. These practices combined with the economic initiative that has dominated Chinese society in its pursuit of modernity had some worrisome effects on their mindset. As discussed in the previous chapter, journalists were more concerned with the economic viability of the newspaper as well as their remuneration than with journalistic independence. At the same time, the conventional view of audiences holds strong, as journalists still consider the audience to be a group of people they would like to impose influence on. Even when they do pay attention to audience preferences and views, these considerations are often from a marketing standpoint, looking to win attention or affect public opinion. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, this understanding of the audience aligns well with the role the CCP wants the media to play, which is to uphold social cohesion, and the conditions the party imposes on their work via the multilevel control mechanism. However, my observation also reveals that, while it challenges the norms of their daily work, digital technology adds an additional aspect to the way journalists frame their profession. Journalists in these three

newsrooms actively sought to redefine their role beyond the party line. In general, they focused on enriching the format of the news and improving their storytelling skills and aimed at new platforms to reach their audience, although their level of expertise was subject to the available resources at each newsroom.

5.1. Journalists and Their Professional Ideology

5.1.1. Gatekeeping and the Individual Journalist

Gatekeeping theory has long been used to examine the institutional, organizational, and professional factors that influence news production. Initially employed to describe the decision-making process of editors and journalists—“Mr. Gates”—in 1950, communication scholars have since developed the theory to reflect a more complex process that involves various social forces that intervene in newsmaking at different stages. First, the theory acknowledges the multiple channels and gates that news items must pass through before reaching an audience. Second, it adopts a broader understanding of the form gatekeepers can take and their varying degrees of autonomy, including people, professional codes of conduct, company policies, computer algorithms, etc. (Shoemaker et al. 74).

Shoemaker and Vos identify five levels of analysis, providing an analytical framework of gatekeeping practices. These include the individual, communication routine, organizational, social institutional, and social system levels. For the individual level, they propose analyzing how people’s characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours affect the gatekeeping process (33). Routines—practices that are similar across communication organizations—form the next level of analysis (31). The organizational level takes characteristics that differentiate media organizations into consideration, including their nature and size, decision-making structure, ownership, and the market they are in (32). At the social institution level, the role of forces outside of the media organization and their interrelationship are examined (ibid). Finally, the social system level of analysis involves the study of the influence of a country’s political or economic system as well as the culture’s ideology (ibid). In order to apply gatekeeping theory to a changing world, it is essential to recognize the complexity of the gatekeeping process.

While this dissertation examines gatekeeping practices through the lens of the individual journalists, what they say and do in fact reflects the social system they live and work within. In their crucial work on gatekeeping theory, Shoemaker and Vos acknowledge the active role of the gatekeeper throughout the news production process: they are “active information processors,” and “they interpret messages, resolves ambiguities, make educated guesses about things that they have not observed directly, and form inferences about relationships” (37-38). At the same time, they highlight the role of other forces in shaping the gatekeeper’s actions, whether he or she is conscious of them or not. As they point out, “agency can be limited by the universality of human psychology, the ubiquity of certain environmental conditions in which gatekeepers operate, or the acculturation or standpoint of gatekeepers” (48). That being said, a focus on the individual journalist entails an understanding beyond his or her characteristics and values to include their social surroundings. As Shoemaker and Vos put it, “an individual level of analysis does not presume individual agency”

(48). Rather, the journalist serves as a window to observe the way that journalism is framed and practiced in a given social setting. Necessarily, other social powers on different levels should be attended to when understanding actions taken by an individual. To use Hellmueller's words, "individual level explanations bear ideological and professional assumptions and have a strong normative context" (48).

This argument resonates with Hall's and Schudson's ideas about journalism being shaped by the ideologies of a hegemonic system. As legitimate agents, journalists literally select, organize, and disseminate the stories that we call news. However, like all individuals, journalists are subjects within a culture that has organized itself around hegemonic discourses, symbols, and ideologies (Hall et al.). Their behaviour follows familiar norms and genres of presentation of information. Hall marks this indefinable "news sense" or "news value" as "one of the most opaque structures of meaning in modern society" (qtd. in Schudson, 277); it is the result of the "ideology" or "common sense" of a hegemonic system (Schudson 277). Through constantly making choices and decisions in story selection, information gathering, and narrative construction and by using their "news senses," journalists practice their gatekeeping role throughout the newsmaking process (Gans). This "culturological" approach to the sociological study of news production "emphasizes the constraining force of broad cultural symbol systems regardless of the details of organizational and occupational routines" (Schudson 266).

Meanwhile, it is equally crucial to acknowledge that news is not only the product of social constraints, but also the result of human construction situated within that symbolic system. Most importantly, journalistic practices effect social values in turn. Although there are conventions and routines of practice that limit their actions in the newsroom, journalists seize control over news by claiming their expertise and negotiating for autonomy. For example, Boyer points out that there is always a human aspect in today's busy media industry with increasing automaticity. Journalists still consider newsmaking a craft that requires professional skills, which can only be acquired through practice. Investigative journalists in China employed tactics to work around party control, furthering the liberal model of journalism in China. To borrow Boyer's words, "both praxiology (news as product of human agency) and mediology (news as product of a complex social settings) inhere in, and are constitutive of, news journalists' understanding of their practices, their agency, and the environment of news" (44).

In the case of this study, an analysis on the individual level contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the Chinese media system as a whole. By focusing on their actions in the newsmaking process, I reveal how different social powers affect the news by influencing journalists' decision-making practices. Meanwhile, I also want to push back against the framing of Chinese journalists as completely controlled workers by showing the different ways in which they seek meaning in their profession.

5.1.2. Chinese Journalists and Their Professional Ideology

"Chinese journalists are younger, better educated, and more likely to be female than ever," Zhang and Su concluded in their 2010 survey of Chinese journalists (19). The profile of the journalists included in this study further confirms this trend. However, the first and foremost

principle of journalism in China remains unchanged: media are the mouthpiece of the party. In *Worlds of Journalism*, a cross-nation project studying journalists' professional views, Hanitzsch et al. label Chinese journalists "collaborative"⁴⁰ because of their strong recognition of their collaborative role: Chinese journalists see themselves as acting in collaboration with society and, therefore, they need to support government policy and provide a positive image of political leadership (189). While Hanitzsch and his collaborators' study highlights one prominent feature of Chinese journalists and offers a way to situate China in a global context, journalists in China are not homogenous. Shaped by China's contemporary history, there are different ideologies at play. As Zhou et al. argue, although certain groups of journalists do hold shared values, the formation of these groups is subject to particular conditions, i.e., time, event, and the field of report. In other words, there isn't a comprehensive occupational group that can include all practitioners in China (npg.).

As demonstrated in Chapter 2, commercialization in the late 1990s followed by the digital transformation led to a diversification of Chinese media outside the party regime. As a result, a sense of professionalism, which can be traced back to Western-funded newspaper practices in the early 1900s, resurged among Chinese journalists (C. Huang; D. Huang; Sparks; Wang, "How Big Is the Cage?"; Zhang and Su). The existence of two types of media organization in China, namely the party-led and the commercial, results in competing paradigms among practitioners. While some demonstrate loyalty to the party, others take inspiration from the Western model, pursuing a more "ideal" form of journalism by treading carefully around the party line. To some extent, these two ideologies formed a kind of counterbalance in shaping journalistic culture in China, before entering a new round of negotiations and adjustments in light of recent changes. As Chin-Chuan Lee ("The Conception of Chinese Journalists") argues, the media has been a site of ideological contestation and accommodation, derived from the ambiguities and contradictions between the revolutionary rhetoric of communism and the practical discourses of marketization (122).

Lee maps out two models of Chinese journalism that coexist in today's China: the communist journalists and the communist-capitalist journalists.⁴¹ The communist journalists consider their job similar to that of the party cadres, aiming to safeguard the grand ideology and political lines. However, that is not to say they have no regard for the interests of the public. They consider "serving the people" to be one of their mandates that runs in parallel with "serving the party." However, by claiming that the party represents the masses, the potential conflicts inherent in the unequal power between these two masters is harmonized ("The Concept of Chinese Journalists" 116). While the communist journalists are heavily influenced by party ideology, the communist-capitalist journalists take on a dual role. As Lee points out, they understand their role as information providers and profit makers while adhering to the ideological guidance of the party. In his view, the consequences of the market forces for Chinese journalists are paradoxical. On the one hand, commercialization led to the emergence of a group of professionals influenced by liberal values, such as investigative journalists. On the other hand, it provides a sort of "negative freedom" as

⁴⁰ They divide the world's diverse cultures of journalism into four broad categories: monitorial, advocative, developmental, and collaborative.

⁴¹ In Lee's historical narrative of Chinese journalists, he includes three models. Apart from the two listed here, he calls the journalists that worked from the 1900s to the 1940s the "Confucian-liberal" journalists.

journalists chip away at state command, ushering in an increasing supremacy of the commercial logic (120).

In another study, Jonathan Hassid further divides today's Chinese journalists into four categories based on their level of commitment to journalistic independency and their willingness to stand up for causes. The *communist journalists* who consider themselves the mouthpiece of the CCP demonstrate low motivation in both categories, similar to Lee's typology. Hassid calls them "a contented group that has little wish to rock the boat" (824). An *American-style journalist* is someone who values facticity and objectivity but tends to avoid confrontation with those in power. The *workday journalists* consider the news a way to make a living; they have no professional ethos and avoid political controversy (825). Finally, *advocacy journalists* are also inspired by the American model but demonstrate a high level of advocacy at the same time; they view themselves as educators and society's problem-solvers (ibid). Hassid specifically calls attention to two categories that are often ignored—the workday journalists and the advocacy journalists—in order to highlight the complexity of Chinese professionals' working ideologies.

Despite their different methods of categorization, these two studies overlap in at least two aspects. First, they both highlight the negative impact of marketization on Chinese journalists: it created a "role orientation that allows no higher purpose than lining their own pockets" (Hassid 828). Pan also voiced this criticism in his assessment of the commercial reform of Chinese media ("Improvising Reform Activities"), and it was recently raised again by Wang and Sparks in their research about the impact of media digitization ("Marketing Credibility"). My observation yielded similar findings. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, there is reason to be concerned about the impact of economic considerations on journalists' practices. The extensive effects of the practical thinking driven by China's rapid economic growth surely merits further discussion. Second, Lee and Hassid both acknowledged the multidimensional nature of the way Chinese journalists form their understandings of the profession. Influenced by two different paradigms of journalism, the work ethos of Chinese journalists is complex and multidimensional rather than simply positioned between two opposing ideologies. In this regard, Hassid's work provides a better framework to dissect their mind set, and I will return to it later.

The fact that Chinese journalists as a group are not unified through a single coherent professional ideology is the subject of multiple studies. Zhang and Su's survey demonstrates that Chinese journalists increasingly consider a media career to be a brief, shifting job, and the gap between ideal and reality is the largest problem facing the profession (19-20). Their findings show the primary role of a journalist is an employee or breadwinner in the market dimension and a mouthpiece of the party and the government in the political dimension, while professionalism receives less emphasis when journalists assess their own roles (20). These competing social forces combined with a weak sense of professionalism have a profound impact on how journalism is transforming as a profession in the digital era. As Zhou et al. argue, Chinese journalists were never unified in a mutual discourse, and the current social transition of Chinese society did not facilitate any unification; instead, it intensified the conflicts among different ideologies (npg.).

Multiple studies show that economic considerations are the dominant preoccupation of the media, and journalists are searching for a viable future (Li and Chen; Wang, "Generational Change"; Wang and Sparks, "Marketing Credibility"; Zhang and Su). More critically, as the economic crisis continues with no solution in sight, the negative impact on journalists' sense of professionalism is

more pertinent than ever. As Li and Chen indicate, unlike the Western view that addresses the crisis from different angles, discussion among Chinese media professionals is primarily dominated by commercialism; commercial success is their point of departure and their ultimate goal, and this highly unified recognition has become the overarching frame that guides their endeavours (140). Wang and Sparks go so far as to argue that “there was never such a strongly marked boundary between commercial and editorial spheres” (“Marketing Credibility” 1303), and journalists are increasingly subordinated to the need to raise revenue, rather than report the news, given newspapers’ aggressive commercial strategies (1301). Both studies link this economic burden with a weakening sense of professionalism. As Li and Chen put it, “commercialism dominating and professionalism leaving” is reflected in a transition in journalistic discourse taking place in China under digitization (135). Zhang and Cao’s survey of the investigative reporter community validates this argument. Their research in 2016 found that the number of investigative journalists in China had decreased by more than 50% over five years, and there was a low level of professional recognition among them with 43.6% considering leaving the profession within five years (33). Wang (“Generational Change”) goes even further in claiming a generational change for Chinese journalists. Though limited in number, the liberal-minded investigative journalists enjoyed high status among their peers and kept morale up for the earlier generation, but the new digital generation, who come from more privileged backgrounds, do not share the same sense of social responsibility nor a belief in journalism as a calling (122).

The commercial pressure that Chinese journalists are facing is strengthening, which results in more aggressive and problematic marketing approaches, but the growing power of audiences in shaping the communication field further deepens the sense of crisis as well. Yin and Wang point out that the rise of social media platforms and internet news services has broken the monopoly that media organizations once held, and IT companies and online users have become new sources of power that define professional boundaries. They described a general sense of powerlessness and confusion among journalists regarding their profession, documenting their beliefs that “we the journalists are no longer social elites” and “we are not sure what to do” (15). Lu and Zhou use “collaborative news curation” to describe the new relationship between journalists and the rest of society. They argue that the state of journalism in the digital era should be understood as fluid. That is to say, every individual that takes part in the news production and dissemination process, including the professionals and the public, has a role to play in shaping the media. They do so by constantly interacting with each other and shifting between different roles (for example, a journalist can change from a professional to a member of the public), and it is the combination of their actions that gives meaning to journalism and each other in the process (41). However, given the extent to which online speech is censored, this kind of interaction can only happen within certain boundaries. To sum up, what is at stake here is the power to shape and define journalism. As Yin and Wang conclude,

For the Chinese news industry, the impact of losing their boundary is both visible and intangible. What is visible, are the shrinkage of the battleground and the reduced scarcity of the media platform. The intangible impact, on the other hand, is the weakened authority in defining the field. Facing this losing situation, the Chinese journalists lose the power to shape and direct the discourse. To play up to [the public] has become the main strategy rather than holding onto the traditional platforms. (13)

The three newspapers in this study provide strong cases to observe these changes that are

universal to some extent, and yet the particular social context in China presents different challenges. *The Kaiping News* showcases the economic burden and its effects on newsmaking, while *The Yunnan Daily* is looking for a way to navigate the conjunction of party ideology and the online community from a more comfortable position. *Pengpai*, as a former commercial newspaper now heavily funded by the government, offers a great opportunity to observe the interplay of the two paradigms. The following sections provide details that shed light on the journalist's role and professional ideology. These segments of our conversations, random moments during the day, decisions that were made, and posts on social media give us a glimpse into their mindset.

It is necessary to clarify at this point that the following description does not aim to cover every single action of the journalists in the newsmaking process nor each individual opinion. Rather, I highlight the major issues that are at the center of forming their professional ideology and further direct their actions. Drawing on my interviews with the journalists (eight at *Pengpai*, eight at *The Kaiping News*, and seven at *The Yunnan Daily*) as well as other informal conversations that I witnessed during my fieldwork, the following sections explore journalists' views of their profession from three perspectives. First, to what extent do journalists exercise self-censorship? Second, how is their understanding of the relationship with the audience being contested in the digital age? And finally, how do they perceive their strength and responsibility as a professional? Put together, these discussions shed light on the way Chinese journalists understand their role and how it guides their actions.

5.2. The Practice of Self-censorship

Journalists' dealings with censorship—the power at the center of the widely shared image of the Chinese media—was usually the topic that needed to be dealt with delicately during my conversations with the journalists. I usually waited towards the end out of fear that it might upset or offend them. But to my surprise, they showed little emotion while talking about it, displaying a sense of acceptance of the reality of the situation. As I started to notice not long into my newsroom observations, for most journalists I encountered daily work did not involve censorship, let alone any conflict with it. When the topic was brought up, they did not appear preoccupied with the issue, showing little sign of discontent or struggle.⁴² As my observation continued, I noticed a high level of self-censorship was consistently at work at all three newspapers, sometimes without journalists' self-awareness. Neither the status of the newspapers nor their economic situation seemed to affect journalists' acceptance of the status quo and their willingness to avoid conflicts. Compared to direct instructions from the information office, which were typically case-related and more frequent during major events, journalists' consciousness of the bottom line had more impact on their daily work.

The following story provides a glimpse into the issue. On May 11, 2018, a warrant was issued

⁴² It is difficult for me to tell for sure that if their reaction was simply a performance for me. However, these actions are relatively consistent among different individuals, some of whom I had met several times and with whom I had conversations before the fieldwork.

for the president of Southwest Forestry University. It was the first time a university president had made headlines with such news. *The Kaiping News* had an advantage in reporting the story due to their geographic proximity. A senior journalist was able to confirm the news with his contact in the police bureau, and the app editor immediately pushed the news online. The news went viral with many outlets reposting from *Kaiping*, including *Pengpai*. In order to get the news out fast, the initial version of the story consisted only of a brief statement. *The Kaiping News* was successful in “being first,” but, unfortunately, there was no follow up to the initial report. In the meantime, *Pengpai* caught up with a detailed story about the fugitive president and the context for the warrant. When questioned afterward about why there was no follow up, *Kaiping*’s app editor explained, “there was a lot of information online right after the news came out, much of which I could not verify. So, I decided to not take the risk and to savour the victory of the first report” (staff meeting, May 14, 2018).

The online editor in this story decided without any interference from the information office that a follow-up report would be too risky, even though an official release from the police confirming the news should have cleared the way for further reporting. However, the editor’s presumption that any kind of scandal should not be elaborated by the media under the “harmonious society” guideline led to his inaction. It is worth mentioning here the important notion of “to build a harmonious socialist society.” Initially a slogan that the CPC employed in its 2006 development planning, it has become the overarching theme of a series of policies and propaganda guidelines to oblige media to avoid reporting on social conflicts and scandals. By linking social harmony directly to social development, the party legitimizes its control of information. This example shows how censorship affects journalists’ decision-making practices without them taking issue with it. Most of them considered the constraint of censorship an accepted fact of their daily work and showed little motivation to challenge it. The fact that this same editor insisted that he worked for the users, not the Ling Dao, shows how deeply this awareness of a political boundary was embedded in his thinking.

This acceptance can be even more clearly seen in another example given by a *Pengpai* journalist. He noticed that a government official had been absent from major meetings for a while. From his experience, he knew that this official might have been brought down for corruption. But there was nothing he could say without an official news release, so he waited and was eventually proven right. For him, knowing the boundary was a professional skill, and he related a personal goal: “within the current limit, to be the first to catch a story, to have the sensibility and the capacity to read the situation” (personal interview, April 10, 2018). Multiple journalists echoed this view and emphasized the importance of safety, i.e., not crossing the limit. Another journalist at *Pengpai*, with whom I had a conversation about the selection of news on the front page, sent me a voice message after our discussion, emphasizing that, “no matter what kind of news it is, an original report or grab news, especially for grab news, there is a fundamental rule: avoid risk” (personal interview, April 12, 2018). Even two journalists who considered themselves as investigative reporters stated, “don’t touch what you are not supposed to” (personal interview, May 14, 2018).

It is not new for Chinese journalists to avoid direct conflict with censorship. Previous studies have amply documented journalists’ tactics for tiptoeing around the boundary (Lagerkvist; Svensson, “Media and Civil Society”; Svensson, “Voice, Power”; Tong, “Guerilla Tactics”; Tong *Investigative Journalism in China*; Tong and Sparks; Wang, “How Big Is the Cage?”). As explained in Chapter 2, censorship is more of a series of vague guidelines than specific instructions, which

left a limited space for interpretation and negotiation. During commercialization, journalists took advantage of this space and developed tactics to work outside the boundaries. Similar strategies were used in the early days of social media until the state started strengthening control in 2013. However, what I witnessed was increased self-censorship to minimize risk. The journalists made little effort to challenge the boundary, and, even more so, they tried not to get close at all. Take a group of innovative journalists at *Pengpai* as an example. While these journalists made efforts to improve their technical skills in data visualization, they seldom took on political topics. The subjects of their work were usually neutral and safe, such as historical population trends in China, variations in provincial policies for caretaking leaves, and how long people stick to their New Year's resolutions. Answering my question about why she had chosen such topics, one journalist told me, "Because it is neutral, it wouldn't offend anyone" (personal interview, April 9, 2018). This awareness of the boundary and the instinct to avoid conflict, not only with political power but with anything that could cause a chaotic situation, has become a built-in mechanism for most Chinese journalists, and it plays into the newsmaking process at the very early stages of story selection. More critically, because of the ambiguity of the CPC's guidelines, journalists were more likely to expand the range of self-censorship to minimize risk in the current "hard authoritarian" atmosphere. As one journalist at *The Yunnan Daily* said, "When I look at a story, my first reaction will be, will this touch any red lines?" (personal interview, May 29, 2018).

Only one senior editor at *The Kaiping News*, who had lived through commercialization as a successful journalist, expressed concerns over this high level of individual self-censorship:

Journalists today are so concerned about being censored. They worry that this cannot be published, or that cannot be published. But this is exactly the kind of report that will attract audiences, and it should be encouraged. As a journalist, don't worry about not being able to publish. Do the job first and let the supervisor to decide. (personal interview, April 16, 2018)

Apart from turning away from sensitive stories, journalists have also developed a sense of responsibility that can resonate with professionalism but remain aligned with the party paradigm. They argue that being a responsible journalist means to reflect the problems that occur during social transition and help ease the transition as directed by the government (personal interview, April 9, 2018); therefore, it is essential for journalists to lead public opinion to facilitate a more positive understanding of the social issue (personal interview, May 21, 2018). These statements indicate a perception of the role of a journalist that is closer to an explainer or an analyst, assisting the government in the management of society, as opposed to the watchdog role that journalists in democratic systems often uphold. This observation echoes the argument made by the *Worlds of Journalism* project, putting Chinese journalists in the "collaborative" category since they work with official state power. Based on this fundamental understanding of their profession, the journalists then build their vision of the audience and a sense of professionalism that avoids conflict with political power holders.

5.3. Understanding the Audience

The way that journalists perceive their audience has always been a key to understanding their professional ideology, bearing in mind that in China this relationship is formed under the shadow of the censoring activities of the CCP. Both the media and online users are subject to control, and furthermore the former is responsible for any materials published by users on their platforms (comments, video/audio clips, etc.). As I observed, filtering users' comments is a common practice at all three newspapers, and the use of user-generated-content is complicated by the need for censorship. This policy of putting the power of control directly into the media's hands shields journalists from being challenged by the growing power of the public to some extent, and it makes any substantial change in their relations more difficult to achieve. It is within this context that journalists construct their own interpretations of the audience.

In general, journalists in relatively non-traditional positions were more open to interactivity and users' opinions. Nearly everyone that worked on WeChat news considered interactions with the users valuable. They emphasized "getting the comments" and "giving feedback" and considered Web metrics an important way to evaluate their work. However, I found no fundamental shift in their understanding of the audience. They still considered the users a mass upon whom they wanted to impose their influence or who could be sold to advertisers. I did notice, however, while they all claimed authority in their own profession, the users' reactions, direct or indirect, carried weight in building a sense of personal achievement. The nature of the newspapers and their economic circumstances played a major role in determining the journalists' willingness to interact with the audience and direct their actions. As a result, unlike the consistency I found regarding the role of self-censorship, journalists in the three newsrooms displayed differing levels of enthusiasm about and employed different approaches to engaging with the audience.

5.3.1. *Pengpai*

Today's *Pengpai* has become a national digital outlet among a middle-aged and educated urban public (Peter et al. 507). Because of the organization's success, journalists at *Pengpai* certainly showed more professional pride compared to their counterparts in the other two newspapers. They were less anxious about attracting traffic and more likely to perceive their users as a group of people that needed to be informed and educated. They imagined a typical user as someone who wanted to connect with the media, so their response was to devise strategies to reinforce user loyalty. For example, one editor explained that she quoted users' comments to incentivize them: "They would be excited to be seen. [Quoting their comment] can motivate sharing behaviour among their social networks" (personal interview, April 12, 2018). Some admitted that they cared about the Web metrics for pragmatic reasons. As one journalist put it, "Media are fighting for more daily active users. Eventually, it is about making money" (personal interview, April 15, 2018).

Their attitudes towards the audience often came with an acknowledgement of the audience's importance to a certain degree but also a refusal to let the audience interfere with their professional decisions. As one journalist put it,

The clicks and the professional standards? We don't think that the number is the only standard. But I think that any media outlet, or any journalist, wants and needs clicks. It is the most vivid and direct feedback from our audience. . . . But as a legacy media outlet, our difference from the rest of them [i.e., the internet service providers] is that we maintain a certain degree of caution towards the numbers. Although I know that some stories or some forms of reports will surely get lots of traffic, we choose not to run them. (personal interview, May 29, 2018)

Across my discussions with the journalists, there was a shared assumption that professional standards and user preferences were irreconcilable. Multiple journalists talked about this dilemma as an either/or decision. In most cases, they considered maintaining journalistic standards the wiser choice that represented true professionalism. For example, when asked whether these two standards were divided, one producer with a prize-winning project responded without thinking, "Of course!" She went on,

The web traffic for this project does not look good. But if you want to produce something aimed at a prize, then you should not care about the numbers. We made the decision to not pursue high traffic during our discussions about the project. (personal interview, April 11, 2018)

Underneath these statements was embedded the traditional journalistic view that audiences are not capable of grasping the truth and deciding what really matters. Some journalists took this dim view to an extreme saying,

I have zero communication with the audience, I only communicate with my peers. The quality of the audience has decreased in general, their knowledge, their demands, and their social status, resulting in the decline of our content quality in general. (personal interview, April 11, 2018)

Even those who said they remained open to user-generated-content and wanted to know their audience as much as possible questioned the significance of user comments, which is the most common way to get audience feedback: "What can be expressed in a comment is quite limited. Most of them are shallow" (personal interview, April 12, 2018). Another journalist echoed,

I would read the comments, and I would follow up on any useful ideas. But I did not find many. Everyone has his own opinion; I don't want to be misguided. (personal interview, April 12, 2018)

Eventually, some journalists insisted on the important role they play in presenting facts:

We, the media, provide information, as close as possible to the truth. There are too many expressions of opinion on social media, very little is about the facts. So, it is up to the media to provide them. (personal interview, April 10, 2018)

It was clear to me that *Pengpai's* journalists were confident about their work. They were less likely to feel challenged by the audience, which sharply contrasted with their counterparts in the other two newsrooms. In my view, this divergence is largely due to *Pengpai's* successful navigation of digitization and comfortable economic situation.

5.3.2. *The Kaiping News*

Journalists at *The Kaiping News* appeared more threatened by the digital transition, and they talked often about exploring new ways of doing their jobs. One online editor stated clearly: “I care about the users, care about whether or not they like my work. I feel upset if they don’t. I work for my users, not for the newspapers, not for my superiors” (personal interview, May 14, 2018). It is worth pointing out that this is the same editor who censored himself from following up a breaking news story out of caution. His idea of serving the users did not prevent him from adhering to the party guideline. However, the journalists’ sentiments toward their audience were more ambivalent when it came to the choice between increasing their readership and maintaining their professional pride. My observation shows that they were more likely to lean on Web traffic data to evaluate their work, while insisting on their editorial authority vis-à-vis their audience. A detail in the design of *The Kaiping News*’s mobile application spoke to the journalists’ general attitude towards clicks: they needed the numbers but hid them when they reflected badly on their work. The newsroom had decided to only display the total when it was over 500 to avoid discouraging the journalists:

Journalists care about the number of clicks and comments very much. At the beginning, they were eager to promote it on their own social media platforms. But seeing that some non-news content could get over 100,000 hits, and ours were a few hundred, they no longer did because of the shame. (personal interview, May 17, 2018)

Quite a few journalists expressed frustration and self-doubt when the numbers were not good. As a journalist working on WeChat news said,

I used to work in print; the transition is painful. The journalistic values that I had built from so many years of experience just collapsed. My understanding of news value has been proven wrong. For the same story, before it was a good piece for the newspaper, but now it is useless, nobody reads it. We were working in the dark before because there was no way to know the audience’s actual opinion. Now, we find ourselves wrong [about what the audience want to read] all the time. (personal interview, May 10, 2018)

However, when I went on to ask her what kind of relationship that she would like to build with the audience, she still referred to a we-speak-you-listen model that did not include audience participation. She suggested a relationship in which the audience was made up of customers who needed to be served by journalists, but service still consisted of one-way communication and the journalist remained the one to make the call about what was useful.

We provide information for you, and we serve you. You like to read our news, you are able to understand it, and you find it helpful. In short, we speak, you listen. (personal interview, May 10, 2018)

She insisted that some things remained unchanged after all: a journalistic sense that cannot be taught at school and the capacity to make a social impact. The only difference from their *Pengpai* counterparts was that they were more likely to adjust their choices based on audience feedback. As a local news outlet, they were looking for information that was less educational and more connected to the daily life of ordinary people, “something with a cooking smell” (烟火气, Yan Huo Qi), as she put it.

Her view represented the general sentiment among her colleagues at the newspaper, showing that deeply embedded journalistic values are still in play. Although *Kaiping's* journalists talked more about the audience and seemed willing to adjust their work accordingly, they fell short in taking substantial actions to interact with them. Their understanding of the users was vague, and their actions were still self-serving. Most of them hesitated then offered assumptions when I asked for a description of their audience. A typical answer went like this: “middle-aged, mostly men, middle-low social level, maybe?” Some admitted that their interest in metrics was mostly driven by the need to make profit:

Our primary goal for now is to use rewards to motivate the audience to share and comment. We hope that by improving the active user rate and increasing the number of users, we can eventually cash in on the traffic and achieve business value. It is as simple as this. (personal interview, May 10, 2018)

Putting together these responses, it would be fair to say that Web metrics held more power over the journalists at *The Kaiping News* than at *Pengpai*. However, this attitude mostly reflected the worrisome condition that the newspaper was in, especially financially, affecting their morale significantly. Journalists did not necessarily link the metrics to their professional skills, and therefore they refused to take them as an indicator to guide their actions. While the journalists felt challenged and frustrated by negative feedback, they relied on a conventional view of the audience as a defence. Similarly to their counterparts at *Pengpai*, the journalists at *The Kaiping News* considered themselves better equipped to process information compared to their online users. As one senior editor said,

Social media just reminds every one of their own journalism dreams. [The users] cannot be a journalist in real life, so they now post on social media. Seeing the comments, likes, they feel like that they really are journalists. Real journalists should have our own standards, insisting on facts and objectivity. Otherwise how are we different from them? (personal interview, May 16, 2018)

It is hard to determine why the acknowledged importance of audience feedback failed to translate into any modification of these fundamental values. One possible reason is the lack of action at the management level. As I argued in the previous chapter, a lack of incentives and guidance on the organizational level played a major role in shaping the newsroom's less effective approach to digitization. In the absence of certainty, the journalists held on to conventional values as a sort of affirmation of their work. One must ask, how long can they hold on to this conventional view towards the audience while their work constantly receives negative feedback? As the competition for users' attention will only get more intense in the future, especially for local newspapers, will the need to compete and survive eventually lead to a more communicative relationship between the journalists and their audience? Of course, there will be limits given the level of censorship in China. But, as I mentioned before, a large part of *Kaiping's* coverage is not politically sensitive in any way. If the newspaper truly wants to stay relevant to people's daily life, shouldn't the journalists listen more?

5.3.3. *The Yunnan Daily*

Given the nature of a party newspaper, the relationship between the journalists at *The Yunnan Daily* and their audience is less complicated. For one thing, there is no economic interest involved. And most importantly, under the party paradigm the fundamental role of the journalist is to inform the public of party policy and to lead public opinion regardless of the platform. Therefore, journalists at *The Yunnan Daily* had a clear vision of their relationship with the audience: the audience was a group of people they would like to persuade. As one editor put it, “To have control is essential here, not journalistic professionalism, although it sounds absurd say it out loud” (personal interview, May 29, 2018).

While their motivations might be political, editors at *The Yunnan Daily* were more open to a different kind of relationship with their audience. They were aware that party newspapers were unpopular with the general public, especially the younger generations, so they made it their mission to change this view by trying to become their “friend.” However, they admitted that they still lacked information about who their users actually were. Although they showed interest in building a more interactive relationship with their audience, that desire failed to translate into action. Similar to the other two newsrooms, they relied primarily on comments to get to know their audience. However, due to the low level of participation on their app and WeChat account, the information that they could get was extremely limited, making it unrealistic to take the audience into consideration when making news:

The link between us and the audience is weak, I don’t have a feeling for their preferences. We still rely on our journalistic sense based on traditional practices to make the selections. There is no question of political news, but for the rest, as far as I know, everyone [at the party newspaper] is guessing. [Success or failure] is highly random. (personal interview, May 29, 2018)

On the other hand, editors were more likely to value traffic metrics and comments as a way to get to know their users and reflect on their work. This attitude was strongest at *The Yunnan Daily* among the three newsrooms studied. One editor said. “The sense of fulfillment? [It comes from] the Web traffic and the feedback. I am longing for their approval, and more and more so” (personal interview, May 29, 2018).

That is not to say, however, that their fundamental view of the audience is any different from their counterparts in the other two newsrooms. They still considered their audience a mass whose opinions needed to shift, although their willingness to connect with the audience and to understand their way of thinking appeared to be sincere. In fact, the way they perceived their role vis-à-vis their audience moved away from journalistic ideology and closer to a public relations point of view. Zhou He calls today’s party newspapers “Party Publicity Inc.” and sees their function more as promoting the image of the party and its legitimacy than ideological brainwashing and conversion (144). As employees of Party Publicity Inc., journalists have come to accept that their role as publicity officers requires using appealing and engaging techniques. Based on what I observed at *The Yunnan Daily*, this might explain the editor’s eagerness to connect with their audience and their pledge to the party. Although they still consider themselves journalists, the PR mindset is what guides their everyday practices.

5.4. Career: Establishing a Role outside the Party Line

Up until this point, I have explored how journalists dealt with two major forces in their daily work: political control and the audience. Undoubtedly, censorship imposed great constraints on their professional performance. And the audience, traditionally seen as easily affected by journalists, has claimed more power in the newsroom, especially at newspapers experiencing financial difficulty. These two factors paint a relatively dire picture of the reality journalists were in at the moment and the prospects for their profession. However, what I noticed during my fieldwork was that the majority of the journalists managed to turn away from the constraints presented by the status quo of the media in China and to look for alternative ways to establish their role as journalists. They worked strategically based on what was possible, looking for opportunities in non-political aspects of their work to build a sense of achievement. Each newspaper had developed its own strategy, which helped to frame the journalist's own identity.

5.4.1. *Pengpai*: Data Journalism, Intellectual Forums, and Charity

From the outset, most journalists at *Pengpai* appeared far less anxious than their peers at the other two newspapers. They were confident in their own and the organization's capabilities, and they were proud to work at one of the best online newspapers in the country. Looking closer though, this confidence was built on a sense of professionalism delicately constructed to avoid any conflicts with political power.

The development of the data journalism team provides a good example. Thanks to a group of elite young journalists, some of whom had received their journalistic education overseas, *Pengpai* was making a name in this emerging field. In terms of professional techniques, the journalists aligned their work with their Western counterparts. They constantly looked to leading organizations like the *New York Times* and FiveThirtyEight for reference, and they cited "making maps, getting technical, telling stories"—the three principles of data journalism from Columbia University—as their guidelines. The team leader encouraged the journalists to try different formats, insisting there was "great flexibility in a trial-and-error approach." Multiple journalists working on experimental projects expressed their satisfaction at being able to explore new forms freely. They labeled themselves "data journalists," aiming to build a reputation for their team in the field and be recognized by other professionals.

Journalists in other fields also expressed similar views. They looked into nontraditional fields that were less clearly defined and therefore less controlled for professional development. Here are some examples:

A journalist who self-identified as an investigative reporter said,

I would like to explore more nonfiction writing, not limited to news. Our group has just started our own WeChat official account. Some stories cannot get the attention on news

platforms, so we want to build our own. As for the rules and censorship, we respect and we obey, doing the best we can in the limited space. (personal interview, April 10, 2018)

A TV-turned-online journalist stated,

I am not interested in content. I am interested in new media technologies and their applications in media. (personal interview, April 15, 2018)

Another online journalist who often worked on experimental projects said,

I think that it is no longer possible to have breakthroughs in content. Because the space is getting smaller on the one hand, and on the other hand our predecessors have already raised the standard to a pretty high level. It would be very difficult to go beyond that. In the digital age, more forms of experience are made possible by digital technologies. Therefore, I am more willing to focus on format innovations. It might feel like the content is driven by the form at times. We had always prioritized content over format before, but it is reversed now. Once a new technology becomes available, I will then look for content based on the desired experience. (personal interview, May 29, 2018)

In sum, these journalists shared a sense of professionalism built around mastering fine techniques as information providers and coupled with a sense of innovation that pushed them to move past information to form and format. They framed themselves as “professionals” without confronting censorship. This view of their profession falls in line with *Pengpai*’s recent marketing strategy. By the time of my visit in 2018, the organization had quietly shifted away from its early image of in-depth critical reporting towards a more moderate concept: a platform of high-quality information. They had recently organized intellectual forums, launched a fundraising campaign for victims in Hong Kong, and participated in charity events, building up an image of a responsible media outlet that does not challenge its ambivalent relationship with the state. I noticed that the journalists proudly shared posts about these events on their personal social media accounts, indicating their support for this direction.

However, it is also worth noting that not all *Pengpai*’s initiatives are geared towards rebranding. Most notably, journalists were concerned with *Pengpai*’s ambivalent practices in its advertising services. As explained in the previous chapter, journalists’ skills with new technologies were also employed in fulfilling advertising services. There were PR pieces published on its platform without clear identification. While muting his disapproval in our conversation, one journalist that I interviewed posted one of these stories on his own WeChat account, writing with a bit of sarcasm that we “welcome our new colleague, Bi Gui Yuan” (i.e., the name of the client, a real-estate company). In the comment section, he quoted the party policy requiring newspapers to clearly identify advertising, indicating his dissatisfaction with such an approach. He was not the only one to voice displeasure. The opening passage of this chapter offers another example; there the journalist was concerned with *Pengpai*’s new image as a marketing agency.

5.4.2. *The Kaiping News*: “Internet Thinking”

A notion that I heard about from my first visit to *The Kaiping News* until the last conversation

I had with the director one year after finishing my fieldwork was “internet thinking” (互联网思维). I asked what it implied specifically, and the director pointed to a business model: the ability of an online service provider to transform resources (news and its users) into profits. It was a shared belief among the leadership that the current crisis meant the collapse of the old newspaper business model, and therefore the future of the organization lay in a viable model based on the new marketing principles of online businesses. However, “internet thinking” was such an unfamiliar concept for most journalists at *The Kaiping News* that no one knew exactly what to do. In the absence of a coherent organizational approach to reinforce this concept, I found a variety of interpretations of this notion that were shaped by journalists’ own practices and strengths. For some, it referred to “an understanding of the online public” and “the capacity to use online tools,” while for others it meant “to collect and analyze data and build a business.” Guided by their own interpretations of “internet thinking,” these journalists put their digital skills to use. But without a unified strategy, their work was very often done in isolation and had little impact on organization-wide outcomes.

One online editor considered his capacity to navigate through a large amount of news a personal strength. He used a combination of search engines and social media to find the source and to do fact-checking. “I can always catch the good news, I have never missed one when I am on duty,” he said to me proudly (personal interview, May 11, 2018). He gave me one example of how he helped the newspaper to avoid misinformation:

Pengpai once reported an earthquake in Dajiang that was later proved to be false. Immediately after I saw the news, I did a search, there was nothing online [except the *Pengpai* report]. My supervisor asked me to run it anyway, but I delayed on purpose. I told him the system was having some issues, which happens quite often. I waited for another ten minutes, then the official news came out: it was false. (personal interview, May 11, 2018)

The journalist in charge of the Weibo account is another example. He was the only journalist maintaining the newspaper’s account, which had a follower count even larger than *Pengpai*’s at the time. Given that the latter was a leading national news outlet and *The Kaiping News* was only an average local newspaper, this achievement was quite impressive. He credited the success to his understanding of the way the platform operated.

You have to interact with the platform [Weibo]. For example, the focus of last year [2017] was live broadcast, and this year it’s video. If your content follows this rhythm, then you will have more exposure on the platform and attract more followers. (personal interview May 11, 2018)

The chief of the online newsroom and his IT team represented this tendency most strongly. As a former print journalist, he had been part of the newspaper’s digitization team since 2011 and became its director in 2016 when the newspaper decided to reform its online newsroom. He shared with me his passionate vision of technological innovation and his disappointment in organizational bureaucracy from day one:

One thing about the internet is that never talk about your journalistic dream. The good communications are always commercialized communications. My goal is to separate the

IT team from the newsroom and found an independent company. I am looking at financing and becoming a listed company. (personal interview, May 7, 2018)

His disappointment with the situation at the newspaper came up often in our interview as well as several casual conversations. His insistence on technological innovation, such as the open-access data platform and implementation of AI technology in the mobile application, seemed almost incompatible with the reality of the newsroom and too bold to achieve at the time. However, when I met with him again at the end of 2019, he informed me he was halfway there. The IT team had separated from the newspaper and was running their own business while continuing to provide technical support to *The Kaiping News*. The team had joined forces with multiple county governments in the province of Yunnan in a project digitizing the local television station.⁴³ The journalists and IT staff used their technical know-how to provide consulting services and technological solutions. The business was succeeding and had already earned over 100,000 RMB by the time we spoke, a number that the online news business had never achieved. Regrettably, while the director and his technical team were able to cash in on their “internet thinking,” their efforts had little impact on the newsmaking practices in their own newsroom.

5.4.3. *The Yunnan Daily*: Enriching the Form

The dominant role of the print newspaper was most pertinent at *The Yunnan Daily*, where the online newsroom had to closely follow the agenda of the press team. It was routine for the online editors to read that day’s newspaper before tackling their own work. Having little say in what was printed, the online journalists sought breakthroughs in digital storytelling while carrying out party publicity. This idea of changing the image of the party newspaper in the eyes of an online public was at the center of the online editors’ self-definition. One editor expressed his desire to “use other ways to let the public know that the Party news does not have to be distant and dull, it can be interesting to read as well” (personal interview, June 4, 2018).

However, while the goal was clear, they struggled to find a clear path because of the limited room for maneuver. One major approach was to work on format. On the afternoon of May 29, 2018, I was chatting with a few editors about their daily tasks in the online newsroom. One editor who had previously worked in the political section of a commercial newspaper compared her experiences at the two newspapers, and her colleague joined in:

Editor A:

Before [at the commercial newspaper] we had some liberty, although it might not always come out. But here it’s stricter, sometimes we cannot even change a word. We have more

⁴³ “County-level converging media reform” (县级融媒体中心建设), meaning to undertake digital reforms of media organizations at the county level, is another initiative launched by the CCP. Projects are typically cooperative between the local information office and the television station.

space in aggregated news though, despite the fact that there are still many rules that we need to respect.

Editor B:

Most of our time is spent on optimizing the article, making it more internet friendly by changing the format, the language, and the layout. It feels like the duties previously performed by copy editors and graphic designers have been transferred to us. The so-called space is nonpolitical, most of the time we play a supportive role.

Editor A:

I used to think that editors did nothing all day because the journalists had done it all, but now [it is hard work].

Most editors at *The Yunnan Daily* shared this sense of a mix of pressure and powerlessness. On the one hand, they were passionate about and felt responsible for making the party newspaper more popular online. Given the rigorous rules about what can and cannot be said, enriching the form of a written story became the site for editors to practice their agency. On the other hand, they had little power over content and what they did had a limited impact on the newspaper's operation. As described by the two editors, most of their work consisted of rewriting print stories, adding photos, and reorganizing layouts. While they had the liberty to add more information or start an article of their own, they could only do so by first aggregating online news. The fact that they were bound to the newsroom greatly limited their ability and even resulted in a sense of unease:

When I find a lead, my journalist's instinct of being a journalist would be to talk to people, (to seek) one to one communication. But now, what I can get is mostly second-hand information, even third-hand. I can't help doubting it. (personal interview, June 4, 2018)

Nevertheless, seeking breakthroughs in editing techniques remained the crucial strategy for the online newsrooms, and a source of confidence for the editors. They would usually share these stories on their social media accounts with pride. For example, one post reads, "First multimedia report of 2020, how could it not have some new functions?" Most recently, the team produced several experimental works on WeChat outside the newspaper's reporting duty, focusing on nonpolitical content. They used soft content, such as local culture and seasonal sightseeing, as a test space to try out new forms of reports, including photo display, video, interactive narratives, and so on. "We are doing the best we can under the circumstances," a senior editor said (personal interview, May 29, 2018).

5.5. Discussion

This chapter addressed the thinking and values embedded in journalists' practices through the lens of three aspects of their daily work as well as the impact of their actions on their perception of the profession. First, the practice of self-censorship deals with the relationship between journalists

and political power. In contrast to earlier studies that showed journalists' growing motivation to maintain independence and documented their tactics for pushing the boundaries, my observation indicates a much lower level of commitment to the cause and a tendency to avoid clashes with the Information Office (C. Huang; Sun; Tong, "Guerilla Tactics"; Tong and Sparks). Even compared to my earlier encounters with journalists between 2011 and 2015, the lack of passion for effectuating any change in the media system today presents a sharp contrast. Underneath the uneventful scene, a high level of self-censorship was at play. It begins in the very early stages during story selection when judging the suitability of a story based on its sensitivity. More critically, under the CCP's call to construct a harmonious Chinese society, there was a tendency to avoid causing chaos by confronting any social issue. My data shows that this phenomenon was common at all three newsrooms, meaning that factors such as the nature of the newspaper, level of digitization, and economic conditions had little impact on how the journalists reacted to political control. Even the journalists at *Pengpai* who were more progressive in terms of embracing Western practices and new technologies were still more likely to pick a story if it was neutral and riskless. It is equally important to point out that this relationship is not just one form of power that journalists deal with daily, rather, it sets an overarching tone as the journalists build relationships with other players.

The way that the professionals connect with their audience is one example. While the Chinese journalists displayed similar views as their Western counterparts in maintaining their authority vis-à-vis the audience, the underlying issue was different. In the Chinese case, journalists' power over their users aligns with the role that the CCP wants them to play and is further reinforced by the party's policy of censoring public speech. The common response when I asked the journalists about their ways of connecting with the audience was via comments and Web metrics, while users' direct participation in newsmaking was absent. This response is understandable given the need for information control, but it also reinforced journalists' own perceptions of their audience in return. Despite differences in the ways in which journalists framed their audiences at the three newsrooms, a tendency to see the audience as a receiver of information was common. Journalists at *Pengpai* were more likely to take on an educational role, while those at *The Kaiping News* wanted to get closer to people's daily lives, acting "as a friend that holds their hand while talking to them." Those at *The Yunnan Daily*, on the other hand, were looking for better ways to deliver information. While this motivation clearly contradicts assumptions about the Web 2.0 era, this need to influence public opinion has led these professionals to pay greater attention to audience feedback, even more than their counterparts at the other two commercial newspapers.

However, it is undeniable that new forms of reporting opened new channels for journalist-audience communication. Most importantly, digital technology has made instant feedback from the audience possible, which has become a pertinent way for journalists to evaluate their work. Journalists' attitudes towards Web metrics and user comments are two-fold. From the commercial point of view, journalists need to attract more users in exchange for economic benefits and therefore are more likely to take user preferences into consideration (Vu). But from a professional standpoint, journalists worldwide have resisted the idea of yielding their power over newsmaking to their audience (Thorson and Wells; Vos). The economic condition of the media organization plays a critical role in balancing these two trends. This dilemma is perfectly reflected in the case of *The Kaiping News*. However, as the economic crisis continues, it will be worth observing whether journalists' attitudes towards their audience change.

In an effort to claim their own legitimacy as the professionals in the field, journalists looked for domains that were under less constraint. Instead of developing shared professional practices, their actions were highly diverse and contingent, depending on what could be done rather than what should be done. Despite great differences among the actual approaches, one general tendency was to focus on the form of a story rather than the content itself, a return to defining journalism as a craft. Journalists at the three newsrooms employed different strategies, each tackling the mission of digitization from a specific angle. Those at *Pengpai* were dedicated to the mastery of new techniques in reporting and aligned themselves with the Western media in this regard. In addition, they envisioned a kind of media outlet that operates as an intellectual platform but without political discussions. Meanwhile, their colleagues at *The Kaiping News* were guided by their own interpretation of “internet thinking” amid a critical economic situation for the newspaper. While their efforts were less unified, they all emphasized being technologically savvy to rebuild the business model. For those at *The Yunnan Daily*, on the other hand, enriching the form of a report provided them a way to act outside the rigid rules of a party newspaper.

Classic studies of news production show that the format of the news is usually predetermined by the medium, and journalists seldom include these considerations during the newsmaking process. Exceptions happen when editors choose a story that carries less importance and more consideration is given to the form and format, such as using a strong photo or exciting film. This tendency is even more pertinent during moments of change. Gans points out that this practice of emphasizing format became more frequent with the advent of colour photography (159). Changes could also happen when strong competition is present, and media organizations are under pressure to enlarge their audience. In some cases, new formats may occur because “journalists become bored with the assembly line and demand changes in the routines” (165).

These past practices shed light on the contemporary changes at the three newsrooms in this study. It would be fair to say that the journalists were compensating for a lack of journalistic independence from political power by exerting control over storytelling and packaging. In other words, while they had limited agency in deciding *what* to say, the journalists opted to practice their agency in determining *how*. Digital technology, a force that contested journalistic norms and upset the media dynamic, has also become an indispensable component of journalism today. And in the case of these three Chinese newspapers, these new fields provide an alternative way for the journalists to define themselves and their profession.

As explained earlier in this chapter, Hassid employs two axes in his typological analysis—the commitment to journalistic independency and to advocacy—to demonstrate the diverse ideologies among Chinese journalists. I suggest adding an additional factor in trying to understand their role today: the level of commitment to technological innovation, which can be further translated into the use of new tools and skills in their practices and the acceptance of new values such as multimedia and user participation. To apply this frame of analysis to this study, journalists at *Pengpai* demonstrated a high level of commitment to a modified version of journalistic independence. That is to say, while the journalists had no issue following the party’s guidelines, they maintained the separation of editorial and advertising activities as well as their authority in relation to their users. They practice advocacy sometimes but only for social issues in line with the party’s ongoing policy. Their commitment to technological innovation varies; those working on social media or experimental projects are more committed than the rest of the newsroom. For the professionals at *The Kaiping News*, the boundary between editorial practices and marketing is less

clear. They seldom take on an advocate role but still consider contributing to the solution of social issues a mandate of their job. They emphasize technological innovation even more than their counterparts at *Pengpai*. The editors at *The Yunnan Daily* share this technological commitment, but they are less concerned with independency and advocacy.

In sum, what I have observed is a reinforced party ideology on the individual level. While the advent of the internet and social media did ignite a spark of democratization in the 2000s, it quickly disappeared after the state updated its control mechanism. During marketization, the same pattern of back and forth between the media and the state also occurred, but eventually it led to a certain degree of openness towards liberal journalistic values while maintaining the party's control in general. Media organizations made small steps towards autonomy nonetheless, partly ensured by a thriving economy. Meanwhile, I observed a step backward in terms of independence. One of the reasons was the updated control mechanism made possible by new technology, including sophisticated online surveillance and a decentralization of the control system, among other approaches. More critically, media organizations' difficult financial situation further weakened their independence. Their pursuit of digitization was primarily driven by the goal of making profit rather than initiating any fundamental changes to the media system. Even *Pengpai*, which is financially stable, was engaged in marketing practices that raised concerns about the identity of the organization. More critically, the fact that its economic viability is very much intertwined with political power has shaped the newsroom's party-leaning editorial strategy. As a result, individual journalists exhibited much less interest in pursuing independence. Instead, they have concentrated on other aspects of their work where they have more control to establish a sense of professionalism.

Journalists have maintained their authority vis-à-vis online users, considering them a mass that needs to be guided or sold for profit. More remarkably, they have taken on various approaches to establishing a role that is not confrontational with the state but nonetheless fosters a sense of professionalism. Sparks ("Beyond Political Communication") calls for a recognition of the plurality of journalism in Chinese media organizations when addressing media dynamics after commercialization. He specifically highlights the practices that are not directly concerned with the struggle for a free media (63). I would argue that it has become even more plural at this point. In their pursuit of self-recognition during the process of media digitization, journalists have embarked on different tasks that do not challenge the party line, depending on what is possible under local conditions. Some approaches are technique-related, aiming to improve their communication skills on digital platforms, while some go even further, moving away from journalism and into other media-related fields (e.g., the construction of digital infrastructure).

All these shifts prompt critical questions about the already dispersed ideologies of media professionals, including the very definition of journalism in the Chinese context. For example, how will the party paradigm evolve in response to emerging techniques of reporting and an increasingly competitive market? Will the *Pengpai* approach, which combines party ideology with a modernized platform and efficient marketing strategy, become a new model? Given the current political atmosphere, do liberal journalism values still have a chance in China? Professional mentorship used to be the way these values and practices were passed on. Now that many of the journalists who pioneered critical forms of journalism have left because the circumstances that made those practices possible have changed, members of the younger generation who started their careers within the past ten years have nobody to learn from (Wang, "Generation Change" 104). With ideological control penetrating every aspect of Chinese society (education, public messaging,

community management), will future generations have the passion to pursue independence and a free press?

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This research began at a moment of dramatic transition when media dynamics and the journalistic profession were being unsettled by the intrusion of digital technology. In the wake of shifts in news dissemination and consumption, both the social significance of media institutions and the very concept of journalism were being contested. Although this transition is a global phenomenon, media organizations in different countries responded in various ways that were shaped by particular histories and social realities. With the majority of studies being conducted in Western countries with a democratic system, this dissertation set out to bring into the conversation the case of China, where journalism is practiced under a different political system and yet might still share the same challenges of the digital era. As our world today is connected more closely than ever, I believe it is crucial to understand forms of news practice and journalistic values in ways that are different from the westernized view. I also want to demonstrate the complexity of Chinese experience beyond the often-generalized understanding of Chinese media as party organs under an authoritarian regime and to show the diversity of practices and underlying rationales. In doing so, this dissertation looked at the newsroom practices and daily work of individual journalists at three newspapers in China, focusing on what they do every day, what they say, and what they think of their profession in response to today's changing media dynamic.

Detailed discussion of the main findings of this research will be presented in this concluding chapter. I will make sense of my observation of these three newsrooms in the context of the wider social setting and put into perspective what these three particular cases can tell us about the digital transition in China in general. After discussing the limitations of the study and possibilities for future research, I will take stock of events and discourses happening outside China in an attempt to situate the Chinese case in a worldwide discussion about shifting media practices and the definition of journalism.

Bearing in mind that China is a vast country and there are various types of media outlets operating under different local conditions, this dissertation studied three newspaper organizations: two local commercial outlets and a party newspaper. Each news organization embarked on different digitization projects that were determined mostly by local contingencies and have ended up at quite different places today. Of the two commercial newspapers, *Pengpai* has become a major national digital outlet, while *The Kaiping News* is struggling economically and professionally. *The Yunnan Daily*, however, is not facing any immediate threat in terms of their viability, but the journalists struggle to find their place in a changed media environment due to a lack of strategic vision at the organizational level. That being said, the aim of this study was to look into how each newsroom integrated new technology into their newsmaking routines and to examine the connections among various agents that affected this process. My analysis reveals the interactions between new technology and the organization as well as the political, economic, and social factors, during the time of transition. Furthermore, the study investigates the way in which journalists in China understand their profession shifts as a result of the changing environment and practices.

To achieve this end, this dissertation adopted a social constructivist view towards technology, understanding its agency as practiced through constant interactions and negotiations with other social agents in play. The historic formation of the so-called dual-track media system in China

(Guo), the socioeconomic configuration at work today, and each newsroom's traditions and particular structure were taken into account as I analyzed the practices and conversations that I witnessed. My observation showed that random connections between different social agents (such as *Pengpai*'s cooperation with the Information Office or *The Kaiping News*'s IT team under a tech-savvy director) played a key role in shaping each newsroom's development path. The pertinent role local contingency played in shaping the innovation approach of the three newsrooms is consistent with evidence from other parts of the world (e.g., Boczkowski's study of the *New York Times*). But in the Chinese case, in the absence of a widely accepted set of professional values to guide practice beyond the ideological principles provided by the party,⁴⁴ news organizations have taken on approaches that are more reactive and less systematic. The plurality of journalism, which Sparks identified following commercialization, has expanded even further.

The impact of digital technology was ambivalent. While news production in all three newsrooms displayed significant similarities, the level of new technology involved as well as the level of expertise differed greatly. Meanwhile, the state has also taken advantage of the highly efficient new technology to update its control mechanism. As a result, a reconfiguration of the Chinese media market is underway. My study finds that a news organization's financial situation is a critical factor in its performance. Similar to Phillips's observations in the UK, growing economic pressure often generated deleterious effects on newsrooms' performance regarding independence and objectivity. The situation was even more challenging for the Chinese media. The market, which once acted as a counter to China's control of information, has had some negative impact on the media. Not only has the economic crisis granted more control to the state through the provision of subsidies, but it also drove media to a more aggressive pursuit of profit, which has sometimes compromised the quality of news.

Moreover, the way that Chinese journalists, as seen in these three newsrooms, understand their profession is also shifting in light of changing practices. On the social responsibility front, the journalists consider themselves responsible for guiding public opinion and leading users towards "a better future," the definition of which is increasingly shaped by the party's rhetoric. In terms of the journalist-audience relationship, the public remains by and large a mass whose attention needs to be captured and sold for profit. While certain journalists did display interest in understanding users, the fundamental view towards their relationship with the audience remains relatively unchanged. Meanwhile, journalists were looking for new ways to practice their profession by taking on exploratory projects. At *Pengpai*, a newspaper regarded as being on the vanguard of digitization, certain journalists aligned with their Western counterparts in terms of mastering digital skills and techniques. *The Kaiping News* is exploring new business ventures outside the conventional range of media practices. Journalists at *The Yunnan Daily* are exploring new forms of reporting beyond the rigid party format. By bringing in new forms of practice into the journalistic

⁴⁴ Deuze defines journalism ideology as a set of consensual occupational ideas and principles that is shared by among journalists across different organizations; it serves to defines a consensus about who was a "real" journalist, and what (part of) news media at any time would be considered examples of "real" journalism (444). In that sense, I would argue that these party principles may not necessarily be professional values for Chinese journalists, at least not for now. However, as the CCP continues its effort to legitimize and theorize its ruling ideology, it is possible that these rules would eventually become professional values shared by Chinese journalists and guides their work.

field, digital technology has opened an opportunity to the profession of journalists looking to establish a role outside the party line.

In summarizing my findings in the following section, I try to zoom out from the particularity of each newsroom to highlight the shared experiences and overall trends among the three news organizations. In doing so, the history of the Chinese media system as well as the social context of contemporary China are taken into account. As I argued before, China is a vast country, and there are various forms of media organization operating under different models—these three news organizations are hardly representative of all Chinese media. My hope is that by putting their practices into perspective, this study might shed light on the contestations and struggles taking place in the Chinese media industry.

6.1. Main Findings

6.1.1. A continuous swing pattern in media practices marked by political control and pragmatic reaction extends into the digital era.

Following marketization, scholars made some interesting observations of the development of Chinese media. The path of Chinese news organizations swings continuously within a space demarcated by party ideology and the liberal values that resurged with social modernization and free market rule, stimulated by numerous political campaigns (Guo; Xu and Sun; Zhao, *Communication in China*). This study reveals that this pattern has continued during the digital transition. While the first years of Web 2.0 in China (around 2003 to 2013) were marked by the surging popularity of social media, enthusiasm over participatory communication, and a relatively favourable policy towards technological innovation, recent years have seen a turn towards strong control facilitated by an updated censorship mechanism and a more compliant market (Svensson, “The Rise and Fall”; Yin and Liu; Wang and Sparks, “Chinese Newspaper Groups”; Wang and Sparks, “Marketing Credibility”). This study started from an assumption that the digital transition might bring change to the power dynamic of the Chinese media system; in actuality, the findings further affirm the central role of political forces in shaping the Chinese media system.

What I witnessed in the three newsrooms is a reflection of the social reality of contemporary China: a turn towards hard authoritarianism mixed with a philosophy that “the economy prevails.” Given the current political constraints, combined with economic pressures and an unpredictable market, the newsrooms’ digitization strategies are pragmatic rather than professionally oriented. Among the two commercial newspapers, only *Pengpai* started with a strategic plan: to build an influential online outlet with economic independence. But as the economic recovery lagged and political control strengthened, the outlet soon gave up pursuing autonomy and adopted a party-leaning editorial policy in exchange for financial and political support from the state, which was key to its eventual success. *The Kaiping News*, who had to grapple with the negative effects of a turbulent market without state subsidization, have turned even further away from serious reporting. It is fair to say that their online newsroom was far more invested in commercial activities in order to survive, such as e-commerce, IT/ PR services, and so on.

The party’s hard control policy and the media’s compliant response is reflected at the individual level as well. As I observed, journalists across all three newsrooms displayed high levels

of self-censorship. In most cases, they understood themselves as explainers or mediators, responsible for assisting the party in order to guide Chinese society to a better future without taking a confrontational stand towards political control. In fact, what constitutes a better future is increasingly shaped by party ideology, paving the way for a legitimization of political control within the professional discourses of journalism. In addition to this observation, my study shows that the journalists were more preoccupied with those professional goals that were distant from political matters, such as mastering online communication skills, perfecting editing techniques, and offering digital consultation services to local media organizations.

In fact, political control shifted in a similar pattern during marketization. The CCP began by taking a relaxed stance to encourage diversifying practices in a market setting, but it started to tighten control once the media's autonomy threatened the propaganda line. The space for independent reporting that had opened up shrank away as a result. However, there is one critical difference between what happened during marketization and what is taking place now during digitization. During marketization, the economic independence that came with growing profits empowered media in China to a certain extent. Market logic played a dominant role in the media's development and became a counterpower to political control to a certain extent. However, during digitization, with the media under threat from economic crisis, there was a retreat of "rational economic calculation," as Sparks et al. put it, and an increase in political control. If we can say that commercial success in the 1990s and 2000s offered hope to some media organizations for increased autonomy, the financial collapse of the digital era had a disastrous impact on the Chinese media that is more far-reaching than in the West because of political control (Liu et al.; Sparks et al.; Wang and Sparks, "Chinese Newspaper Groups"). Indeed, political control has gained a stronger hold over other social segments because of the weakened market. As Wang and Sparks point out, in the face of economic difficulty, "subsidies, both direct and indirect, have re-emerged as significant parts of the overall revenues of newspaper groups" (111). Therefore, not only is the media swinging towards hard control at this stage of digitization, but the dominance of party control is further enhanced because of the media's weakened financial situation during the digital transition.

That being said, even though the swing pattern continues, the range is different. The media follow the party line more closely in exchange for funding or simply because the economic situation is too burdensome and leaves no resources for any other tasks. Looking forward, as the economic difficulties that news organizations face persist worldwide with no clear path ahead, the dominance of political influence on media in China is likely to continue. Furthermore, this study took place in a pre-Covid world, and the lengthy pandemic only strengthened the idea of strong government and public compliance. However, one important feature of the Chinese system that we have seen throughout history is that dramatic changes can happen in unexpected moments; sometimes a change in leadership style or the breakout of a public event is enough to tip the country into a different direction. Heavily influenced by external forces, the Chinese media will most certainly continue to adjust to a rapidly changing society.

6.1.2. Pursuing a career under the influence of a "the economy prevails" philosophy.

As shown in this study, while working under political influence, journalists across the three newsrooms looked for ways to establish a professional role away from the party line. Their

perceptions of their role were heavily influenced by the circumstances of their work and their level of confidence, and their professional pride was strongly affected by the economic situation they were in. I found that financial issues have become the most overt constraint that affects a newsroom's digital transition and journalists' actions and perceptions. As shown by *The Kaiping News*, quite a few disputes in the newsroom over online news selections, reluctance to cooperate with online teams, and a lack of motivation on the side of the print staff turned out to be related to economic issues. The newspaper also engaged in commercial activities that often took priority over editorial needs. For *Pengpai*, who were able to navigate the crisis thanks to state funding, financial stability took precedence over the pursuit of independence. However, the economy's effects can be two-sided. As I observed at *The Yunnan Daily*, a lack of financial pressure to innovate contributed to the organization's passive approach towards digitization.

Although the negative impact of market forces on news production has been well-known to sociologists, its influence on the Chinese media and its journalists is more critical than in the West (Lee, "The Conception of Chinese Journalists"; Pan; Sparks et al.; Wang and Sparks, "Marketing Credibility"). In fact, I would argue that the philosophy of "the economy prevails" that began in the 1980s had far-reaching effects on the mindset of the Chinese public in general, and this is reflected in the way the media operates. Deng Xiaoping's famous motto from a 1992 speech, "The black cat or the white cat, whoever catches the mouse is the good cat" (不管白猫黑猫, 只要抓到老鼠就是好猫), delivers a key message to the Chinese public. That is, action triumphs over discussion, and one should gain profit whichever way possible. His intention at that time was to generate in the Chinese people a passion for economic development after years of political struggle and to encourage them to think outside of the conventional settings of a planned economy. While this thinking was, and still is today, the driving power behind the story of the Chinese economy's great success, it also generated a kind of thinking that promotes consumerism and prioritizes economic benefits over everything else. Implicated in the media's marketization process, newspapers have pursued profit aggressively and without properly addressing the boundary between marketing and journalism or forming a coherent professional ideology (Lee, "The Conception of Chinese Journalists"; Pan; Wang and Sparks, "Marketing Credibility"). Pan's reflections on marketization shed light on the effects of this macroenvironment on media practices. As he argues,

Three characteristics of this macroenvironment stand out. First, no coherent conceptual framework of reform or set of clearly formulated and articulated depictions of the system to which the reforms are directed has been developed.

[. . .]

Second, a great degree of uncertainty prevails among journalists concerning the "true" meaning of the party line and policies. In practice, this also means that bureaucratic and ideological hurdles are placed before anyone who wishes to take an innovative step. Third, journalists and media organizations all face the immediate concern of financial survival.

[. . .]

In this macroenvironment, journalists must design and/or engage in activities that arise from specific occasions. These activities are doable and may help accomplish some immediate

goals in a narrowly specified situation, although sometimes they are tactical moves within a vaguely stated vision for an organization's future. (78-79)

Under this climate, journalists have inherited a similar pragmatic style of thinking in understanding their role as professionals. As Lee argues, "The current stage of primitive capital accumulation in China represents a radical pendulum swing in a short span of time from decades of material asceticism to material fetishism where money is everything if not the only thing, with little regard for justice, fairness, or democracy" ("The Conception of Chinese Journalists" 122). As revealed in his study of Chinese journalists, material gains play a major role in transformations in journalists' psychologies: the wealthier they become, the less politically engaged they are (120). To add onto that, my observations show that financial difficulties have the same depoliticizing effect. In fact, the policy of "the economy prevails" has become translated into the idea that "the economy triumphs," as if money is the golden standard by which to measure success. That is not to say that money is the only thing that journalists care about, but it is undeniable that the economic aspect of their jobs imposes such a heavy weight on their shoulders that it often takes priority over professional values.

The lack of a coherent professional ideology might be to blame. As Zhang and Su point out, journalistic professionalism receives less attention compared to politics and markets when journalists assess their own roles (20). Influenced by the organization's pragmatic strategy and a society that values financial success, journalists tend to establish a role that first and foremost follows the party line and prioritizes economic prospects, secondarily, to pursue the kind of professional career that is possible under these circumstances. Digital technology has provided more possibilities for pursuing a career by expanding the field of journalism and bringing in new forms of practice. As shown in this study, journalists across the three newsrooms engaged in a wide range of activities as they tried to establish a professional role away from the party line. Given the generally provisional nature of the Chinese media's response to digitization, we can expect a relatively unified set of values regarding politics, but more diverse understandings of their professional role among journalists from different organizations driven by their need to achieve success. Echoing my argument from the previous section, the way that Chinese journalists perceive their profession demonstrates a two-dimensional shift. They are more unified in accepting political control, while their understandings of their profession are more diverse as a result of the media's pragmatic approach to digitization. As Pan argues, "journalists' actions often reflect their short-sighted, opportunistic, and entrepreneurial efforts to improve their chances of success, usually defined in terms of financial well-being and/or acquiring professional prestige, in a situation that is full of constraints, contradictions, and uncertainty" (79). His words might be harsh, but they certainly speak to the worrisome impact of China's rapid economic expansion in the past 30 years or so.

6.1.3. Doomed local newspapers and a new form of party organ?

One question that has prompted extensive discussion is the gatekeeping role of media organizations during news production in an age when more information is available to the public. The evidence suggests that different media organizations in different contexts have taken on various approaches to fulfilling their responsibility for gatekeeping. Vos upholds the view that sees

gatekeeping as a role that carries public and moral responsibility; the fact that there are now other gatekeepers does not prevent journalists from fulfilling their duty conscientiously (9). Heinderykx echoes this view, arguing that the audience's attention span is still limited even if the editorial space is not and that the audience still values quality news and looks for outlets that offer the optimal ratio of relevance to volume (255). This argument is supported by research into legacy media like the *New York Times* (Boczkowski; Usher). However, the situation is more critical for journalists in smaller newsrooms. For example, Phillips confirms that journalists with the least commercial pressure are closer to the notion of the "pure journalist," enjoying a greater degree of autonomy, but that privilege is increasingly restricted to a shrinking number of elite journalists (79). She suggests that there is a widening gap between the global brands and the majority of media organizations, whose journalists face various degrees of economic pressure.

That gap can be observed among the three newspapers in this study. All three were local outlets in the pre-digital age. Today, *Pengpai* is a nationwide online newspaper while the other two struggle to reposition themselves in a changing market. Their different paths to digitization reveal that the dynamic of the current dual-tracking media system is in flux, as the line between the commercial news organizations and the party organs blurs as digitization progresses. Organizations like *Pengpai*, a commercial operation that has nonetheless received substantial public funding and since adopted a propagandistic editorial policy, are emerging as a new form of party organ. Meanwhile, the majority of the local commercial and party newspapers are still struggling to establish an effective strategy within the new media dynamic.

During its explorations online, *The Kaiping News* initially opted to include more national news but then reversed this strategy, returning to a focus on local news and services. However, neither of these two approaches was effective in attracting more users thereby improving its economic situation. Their most successful business so far—offering technical solutions to other media organizations as they go through their own digitization process—does not involve news production. And *Kaiping* was not alone in expanding its business beyond newsmaking. *Pengpai* also applied its journalists' professional skills to its marketing services. My observations are consistent with Wang and Sparks's study, which shows that across China the press have vigorously pursued revenue via activities unrelated to editorial functions, and who warn of severe consequences for the role of journalists, such as a weaker sense of professional identity ("Marketing Credibility" 1314-1315). While the financial crisis that local commercial outlets now face is a worldwide challenge, commercial newspapers in China are in a unique position. As Sparks et al. point out, as state-owned companies they cannot resolve their financial difficulties the way their counterparts under a free-market system do; strategies such as shutdowns or mergers, which are a rational economic response to the current situation, are not an option (188-189). That is to say, despite their unsuccessful attempt to regain profits, local newspapers like *The Kaiping News* are likely to drag on with low-quality news and problematic commercial activities. As the senior editor at *The Kaiping News* brought up in our very first conversation, "what does a local newspaper mean in the digital age?" It seems that for the majority of local newspapers, this question remains unanswered. They do not enjoy the subsidy of a party organ, but they are not free commercial operations either. This ambivalent status complicates their digitization. Evidence can be seen in the fact that the newsrooms of *The Kaiping News* and *The Yunnan Daily* recently moved into the news group's newly constructed building in 2020—funding such a costly project would seem to be at odds with the media's declining revenues and their struggle to find a place in the market.

Meanwhile, the rise of *Pengpai* tells another story. Wang and Sparks (“Chinese Newspaper Groups”) argue that there has been a “resurgence of the Party press” due to its financial advantages. I would add that, as the majority of the traditional party titles fall short in adopting aggressive digitization strategies, a new form of online party organ is in formation. Based on what I have observed, *The Yunnan Daily* has yet to regain its popularity among online users due to bureaucratic constraints and a lack of incentives. The paper’s digitization efforts were insignificant, and its editorial approach remained subject to the personal preferences of the local party official. Meanwhile, *Pengpai* is becoming a new form of party newspaper that more effectively publicizes the party’s message because of its popular appeal. The newspaper is more flexible and sensitive to market needs because of its commercial nature, and the substantial public funding gives it another advantage in integrating new forms of content compared to other commercial outlets. While the newsroom has successfully established an online presence with national coverage and popular products, it has since adopted an editorial policy that is closer and closer to that of a party organ. I asked one journalist whether he thought the tone of *Pengpai*’s reporting increasingly resembled the tone of a party newspaper. He replied affirmatively, “Of course! Today’s *Pengpai* IS a party newspaper in my opinion” (personal interview, May 29, 2018).

This turn represents an interesting shift in China’s media system, in which the party organs are mainly responsible for delivering the party’s voice while the commercial media provide more diverse forms of journalism to meet the various needs of the public (Guo; He). The rise of a newly emerged hybrid online newspaper represents another strategy as the CPC continues to adapt its control mechanism to today’s communication field. In fact, it is not the first time the party has employed popular forms of journalism to reach the younger generation and publicize its ideology. Scholars have documented a few party organs taking on relatively market-oriented editorial strategies, notably the national television network *CCTV* and the party title *China Youth Daily* (He; Wang et al.). According to He, it is inevitable that the party will adopt more market-oriented approaches in its communication with the public rather than ideological doctrines, due to factors like the younger generation having grown up in the post-reform era, people’s dissatisfaction with political suppression, and the emphasis on maximizing profit (145). But as most of the conventional party organs lag behind in the digital transition due to the press-first principle and the party’s journalistic culture, the CPC has taken on new approaches to reinforce its voice online. By providing financial support to commercial organizations with public appeal like *Pengpai*, the CPC opens another branch of “Party Publicity Inc.,” as He calls it. There is no doubt that the traditional party organs will continue to be an important apparatus for the party to maintain its presence in the press. At the same time, I anticipate that we will see more commercial media outlets take on a propaganda role in various forms, especially under the current hard authoritarian policy and economic hardship.

6.2. Limitations and Future Studies

This dissertation focuses on today’s media transition, including the tremendous challenges and opportunities that media all over the world are facing. The digital transition is critical to practitioners as they deal with new forms of producing and transmitting news as well as changes in how the public consumes news. At the same time, it is also challenging for researchers to make sense of the changing times and to understand the state of journalism today. Reflecting on the

process of creating this study, there are several issues worth raising. First, the selection of cases is not ideal. Although they all began in a similar position (prominent local outlets), their situations in terms of market share, finances, and human resources are dramatically different (notably between *Pengpai* and the other two newspapers). While this gap contributes to a more diverse profile of cases, it also makes comparison between the three newsrooms difficult. However, it is essential to acknowledge that it is not conventional at Chinese media organization to welcome academics into the newsroom, and the current political climate further hampered communication. I initially reached out to the *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, a newspaper known for its progressiveness that had already been the subject of a few studies. But I was told they had to close their doors to outsiders because of stricter control by the authorities. Eventually, I had to use my personal connections with the newspapers in making my selections. In the future, it would be instructive to compare the practices and ideologies at work among news organizations in relatively equal situations. For example, among party newspapers, among local commercial outlets without financial aid, among leading commercial organizations, etc.

Second, as I mentioned in the methodology section, I made the choice to only observe each newsroom rather than taking on any tasks. Participating in newsroom activities could make the researcher less attentive to what is going on outside his or her working range. Additionally, such an approach demands more cooperation on the part of the newsroom, and it is reasonable to assume it would have further diminished my chances of gaining access. However, I have to admit that I encountered limitations in remaining an observer. For example, with more and more tasks taking place inside the screen, sometimes it was hard to closely follow the tensions of an evolving situation. Notably, chats on social media, in groups or individually, have become a norm for communication among coworkers in all the newsrooms I visited. I had access to some of the group chats, but mostly those were used to deliver routine messages, such as notices for meetings, administrative announcements, etc. Unfortunately, I was not accepted into the smaller groups that were usually created for a specific project or among journalists that worked closely together. In addition, I also noticed that journalists have become far less active in recent years on their personal Weibo or WeChat accounts compared to the early days of social media. I followed a number of journalists at each newspaper, and the frequency of their posts, other than reposting from the newspaper, was extremely low. This is understandable given that small group discussions are more private in nature, and journalists are better equipped than the general public to understand surveillance on digital platforms. However, it raises further questions regarding how to conduct future ethnographic research in newsrooms. Given the extent to which digital platforms are involved in news production today, how can we better understand the nuances of the journalistic workplace? Of course, what the workplace consists of is up for debate nowadays, as the term “newsroom” no longer solely refers to the physical office space that people were familiar with in the traditional media era. This is another worthwhile question to look into, especially as we head into a post-Covid-19 world. A buddy system—partnering with one or multiple journalists—might be more helpful in answering these questions. However, such an approach would demand a higher degree of cooperation on the part of the organization and the journalists. Autoethnography, journalists’ own accounts of their experiences, could be another way to offer valuable insights into a changing profession.

6.3. Reflection: A Chinese Model of Journalism? A Changing World of Journalism?

One of the goals of this study is to bring the Chinese case into a global conversation about the ways in which journalism is transforming in the context of today's new media dynamic. I started my PhD journey in the fall of 2014. The dramatic changes that have taken place since then are remarkable, not only related to journalism itself, but also the world we live in today more broadly. At the end of this dissertation, while living through a global pandemic and witnessing the chaos around the US presidential election and the debate around it, I would like to take a step back from the three specific Chinese newspapers and look at the media in China as a whole, trying to put what I have observed in these particular settings into the context of China's social transition and a shifting global dynamic. The question that I ask myself is, where does a discussion about the current transition of the Chinese media fit into the global conversation about the state of journalism in general?

As I argued earlier, the study of the Chinese media in the English-language literature has long been subject to a Western bias that frames China as both unusual and marginal: an exception that needs to be corrected. Vukovich points out that there is "a logic of becoming sameness" in Chinese study from the West: "China is still not 'normal' (and has been tragically different), but it is engaged in a 'universal' process such that it will, and must, become the same as 'us'" (2). As Hanusch and Hanitzsch have theorized, journalism is a social institution that is discursively (re)created, (re)invented, appropriated, and contested (306). From that perspective, we should view the concept of journalism in a more open and fluid way. In my point of view, the conventional "us versus them" narrative is shifting in two dimensions within the current global dynamic. First, the way that journalism is being contested and transformed within the Western world is worth mentioning. While the diversification of the notion "West" has long been recognized, dramatic changes are taking place within the Western world, especially in the US, the birthplace of the normative model of journalism and the country once synonymous with the concept of the West. The current political climate in the US and, notably, public disagreement over the Trump presidency, the pandemic, and the presidential election have spurred debates over the normative values of journalism, such as truthfulness and objectivity, and the way journalism is practiced across different platforms.

CNN host Boris Sanchez went off-script in the middle of a news broadcast, rejecting Trump's claims of voter fraud in an interview on Fox News, explaining,

As journalists, we are trained to be impartial, to be objective, to look at policy, to look at the marketplace of ideas, and judge it from a dispassionate position. But this is not about the marketplace of ideas, this is about the marketplace of reality.⁴⁵

This is just one example of journalists having to take a side and state their own opinion as opposed to following conventional practices to ensure objectivity. Even more aggressively, major US news networks including ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN all cut away from then-President Trump's speech on November 5 airing his fraudulent claims about the election. These examples demonstrate that the way that the US media practices objectivity may be changing in response to

⁴⁵ See: <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2020/11/29/trump-fox-news-interview-boris-sanchez-reacts-nr-vpx.cnn>.

an increasing partisanship in media organizations driven by ideological positioning rather than traditional journalistic ideals. As C. W. Anderson argues, “journalism, by taking an increasingly oppositional stance toward the Trump administration over the past four years, has begun to transform itself far more fundamentally than any digital technology (blogging, podcasting, the iPhone) ever has” (“Journalism Changed under Trump”). The conventional method of showing two sides of the story and relying on a web of facticity that predominately consisted of elite sources has proven to be incompatible with today’s communication dynamic. When political elites problematize this approach (for example, by lying), the principles of detachment and objectivity are found to be at odds with truthfulness. More critically, social media has become a crucial channel for people to deliver as well as receive news. As a result, liberal-minded journalists are forced to “choose between their values and what they see as their duty to report the positions and statements of those in positions of political power” (ibid). Moving forward, it is reasonable to presume that discussions about truthfulness and objectivity will continue, along with reflections on legacy media’s approach to political coverage. In his answer to Nieman Lab’s call for predictions for journalism in 2021, Anderson argued that there is no question that major changes will take place in American journalism: the media will hold onto its liberal values and maybe take a more radical stand towards democracy. However, given that social media has created a kind of echo chamber for like-minded people, would a more liberal media alone be enough to counter disinformation online? If not, is a new way of imagining legacy media and news reporting necessary? Or should we reassess the way social media platforms operate?

Second, is it time for the West to revisit the way it frames the Chinese media? Given China’s growing power in the world and its course over the past few decades, it is time to address the significance of the “Chinese experiment.” If China is not “something else” that will eventually become “us,” meaning inevitably following a path of political reform towards democracy, then what is it? Where does China fit into, or to what extent does it alter, the spectrum of journalism across the globe? Reflecting on Chinese media studies, Chin-Chuan Lee (“Voices from Asia”), a well-known scholar in China and the US, calls for “localized experience and global purview.” Rejecting both hegemonic discourse and the idea of “Chinese exceptionalism,” he argues:

The study of Chinese journalism is by no means intellectually self-sufficient or isolated; it should interpenetrate with the theoretical and methodological advances in the field of international communication and, more important, in the larger currents of humanities and social sciences.

What we aspire to establish is, in sum, certain general theoretical perspectives with Chinese characteristics that arise from and highlight cultural specificity in our problematic consciousness and interpretations, but ultimately emerge from this cultural reflection to develop a broader view of how the world works. If we succeed in establishing such general perspectives that allow internal differences, speak with a distinctive cultural accent, and yet transcend theoretical parochialism, we will be in a strengthened position to maintain an open-minded and mutually enriching dialogue with the Western literature on an equal footing. (834)

It is with this argument in mind that I have tried to position China within an international dialogue about the role of media and the practice of journalism. It is true that digitization has challenged the Chinese media system and the way journalism is practiced. But as the three newspaper organizations demonstrate, combined with the social dynamic in general, media in China have shifted further away from the trajectory of “us” in terms of their relationship with political power while sharing similarities in other aspects (for example, interactions with social media, the integration of new technologies and practices, and the relationship with the audience). While the outlets have made progress in their adoption of new technology, the level of self-censorship and acceptance of political control has increased. However, maybe it is time for a more nuanced understanding of the Chinese media’s alterity. It is crucial to acknowledge that Chinese journalists identify their role in a similar way as their Western counterparts: they have a sense of social responsibility and conceive their position in society in terms of their relationships with other social institutions as well as the public. As De Burgh point out, there is a strong sense of mission among Chinese journalists that is rooted in the Chinese literati tradition combined with Western influences (204). In the meantime, Chinese journalists share the challenges and struggles of the digital age. Their profession has been contested by the rise of social media, and they are exploring new ways of doing their jobs under growing economic difficulties.

The major difference lies in how they view their relationship with the state in fulfilling their professional duty. I agree with Hanitzsch et al. that Chinese journalists have taken on a role that is more cooperative with political power. Instead of acting as watchdogs, Chinese journalists consider themselves “collaborators” with the government in promoting measures to remedy social problems and drive social reforms (167). They also emphasize that acceptance of collaboration is not always based on coercion, but also at times on broader cultural values that resonate with demands for social harmony and respect for authority (303). China’s tradition of Confucianism forms an underlying cultural root of this collaborative relationship. As Lee (*Crisscrossing*) points out, instead of taking an oppositional position towards power, Chinese intellectuals long for recognition from authority to fulfill their patriotic ambitions (224). Therefore, they are more willing to reconcile when doing so resonates with their sense of duty.

Many of my conversations with the journalists reflected this tendency, and the tougher communication strategy that the CPC has taken on under President Xi Jinping, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, only strengthened that role. The Chinese media is at the forefront of delivering the party’s message in the country’s battle against the virus and international criticism. Given the influence of cultural and political-economic factors on a country’s media system, it would be reasonable to assume that this role for journalists within Chinese society is unlikely to change any time soon.

That being said, instead of criticizing and framing Chinese journalism through the “becoming-sameness” narrative, it is worth looking at the media in China in a more complex and nuanced way. As Vukovich argues, such “positive” accounts of China do not necessarily mean viewing it in a “favorable” way, but they reflect an effort to understand aspects of China in its positivity or, at least, to acknowledge that it too has its own rationality (64). Such an approach, in his opinion, contrasts with the method of resolute debunking, symptomatic reading, or pathologization (ibid). I find his argument extremely pertinent as we search for more inclusive ways to understand journalism around the world. As desirable as it may be, the normative model that has democracy at its core might not be the only viable form of journalism, and there are different models that

necessarily cannot align with this model when the political base of democracy is absent. By making this point, I do not intend to justify censorship nor the propaganda style of reporting, but to make clear that the practice of journalism in China is not purely a result of control and that some practices derive from a culture that “values social harmony and respect for authority” (Hanusch and Hanitzsch 303). By acting as coordinators, Chinese journalists reflect a vision of their role in society that is constructive to the development of China as a whole. To understand the social traditions and values embedded in Chinese journalists’ daily practices is one crucial step towards better communication and mutual understanding, which is even more valuable in the post-Covid world.

Putting these thoughts together, the discussions that are taking place in the West around some of the normative values of journalism and the transformations of the Chinese media in light of technological innovations both speak to a need to expand our understanding of journalism. Instead of following a set of rigid rules, journalistic practices constantly shift, and the boundary between different models is obscure. In his study of Chinese journalists during commercialization, Pan argues that, instead of following a specific model, what journalists actually do and how they interpret what they do constitutes the essence of journalism reforms (104). When we look at today’s media dynamic, this argument still holds true. In that spirit, I would like to end my reflection by quoting from one journalist participant in my study:

Professionalism is not necessarily a fixed standard. Although it is still highly valued, especially among freshmen and highly accomplished journalists, I think that everything needs to be reevaluated now.

[. . .]

I read a book called *The Future of Media*, and I found an interesting idea. The author suggests looking at media outlets as museums, as public education institutes. Indeed, to make profit is a very challenging task for a media organization today. But they are still instrumental in disseminating news and facilitating debate. To some extent, the media plays an educational role for the public. As such, the media merits public funding. (personal interview, May 29, 2018)

In the wake of shifting media dynamics, the door is open for media practitioners and scholars to reimagine, reinvent, and redefine the very notion of journalism.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions*

1. What is your educational and professional background?
2. What does a typical day at work look like for you?
3. What are the software/digital devices you use in your work?
4. What media do you consume regularly?
5. Do you use social media? If yes, how often and for what purpose?
6. Where do you usually find news sources?
7. How do you decide what story to follow?
8. What difficulties in relation to new technologies have you encountered in your work?
9. Have you noticed any differences between your current job and previous ones?
10. Which report do you feel most proud of?
11. Do you interact with users? If yes, in what ways?
12. How do you understand your relationship with the users?
13. How do you understand your relationship with the State?

*These questions were used to start the conversation and lead the interview. The interviews could go in different directions based on the area of expertise of the participants.

Appendix B



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant: Mengshu Chen
Department: Faculty of Arts and Science\Communication Studies
Agency: N/A
Title of Project: Digital News and Negotiated Agency: The Practice of
Newsmaking in China's Newspaper
Certification Number: 30008504
Valid From: January 31, 2018 To: January 30, 2019

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Pfaus".

Dr. James Pfaus, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant: Mengshu Chen
Department: Faculty of Arts and Science\Communication Studies
Agency: N/A
Title of Project: Digital News and Negotiated Agency: The Practice of
Newsmaking in China's Newspaper
Certification Number: 30008504

Valid From: February 07, 2019 To: February 06, 2020

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Shannon Hebblethwaite".

Dr. Shannon Hebblethwaite, Vice Chair, University Human Research Ethics
Committee



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant: Mengshu Chen
Department: Faculty of Arts and Science \ Communication Studies
Agency: N/A
Title of Project: Digital News and Negotiated Agency: The Practice of
Newsmaking in China's Newspaper
Certification Number: 30008504

Valid From: March 09, 2020 To: March 08, 2021

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard DeMont".

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant: Mengshu Chen
Department: Faculty of Arts and Science\Communication Studies
Agency: N/A
Title of Project: Digital News and Negotiated Agency: The Practice of
Newsmaking in China's Newspaper

Certification Number: 30008504

Valid From: March 08, 2021 To: March 07, 2022

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard DeMont".

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee