

## *The State and Watchdog Journalism in China since the Reform*

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### **Abstract**

The main purpose of this study is to explore the state's influences on watchdog journalism in an authoritarian China. In classic liberal theory, the western independent watchdog press must have two pre-conditions: press ownership in the market and non interference and non control from the state. But In an authoritarian country such as China, although the state is dominant control power for media, the state promotes watchdog journalism actively. Starting from the party's thirteenth Congress in 1987, the watchdog press has since been used in every Party congress report from 1987 to 2007, a sign of its importance to the party-state. But after the Tiananmen crackdown, the party-state is playing the contradictory role in both promoting and stifling the watchdog press. This paper examines the state's role changes on the watchdog journalism since the reform to the present over 30 years, and seeks to present a particular state-controlled institution within the Chinese watchdog press and one that is different from western watchdog press. This study aims to explain three questions: How does the state influence watchdog journalism? Does the state promote and stifle watchdog journalism? What key factor contributes to the shift in the state's promotion and control? This study found that the state's role on watchdog press has a shift between promotion and control. This depends on the state's attitude changes between the media as a form of the state's interest expression and media as a form of the public interests expression.

Keywords: Watchdog journalism; the state's role ; authoritarian china

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## Introduction

In Chinese media field, the “state” is regarded as the dominant control power (Xia&Yuan, 2014). But the state is still strictly controlling media coverage? Neither as in a totalitarian regime which is characterized by dictatorship, the state is strictly controlling the society and the media, nor as in a democracy regime which emphasizes non interference and non control for media from the state, in an authoritarian regime such as China, the state’s control coexist with loosening for the media. The main purpose of this paper is to explore how the state influences media in an authoritarian China. In this paper, the party, the government and the leaders are all regarded as the concept of the “state”. In addition, this paper only explores the watchdog journalism of traditional media such as newspaper, not includes the watchdog reports in internet.

In classic liberal press theory, the western independent watchdog press must have two pre-conditions: press ownership in the market and non interference and non control from the state<sup>1</sup>. But this western context is clearly not applicable to analyze Chinese watchdog journalism. In Chinese authoritarian regime, although the state is dominant control power for media, the state promotes watchdog journalism actively. In the 13th party congress report in 1987, for the first time, the state introduced the media’s watchdog function. The 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th party’s congresses also used watchdog journalism, a sign of its importance to the state.

Chinese watchdog journalism in the 1950s experienced a boom, but during the Cultural Revolution it almost disappeared. Since the reform in 1978, with the media's market-oriented reform, watchdog press has a rapid growth. In the 1990s, watchdog journalism has reached its peak. Nowadays it has great influences on Chinese politics and society. For example, the “SunZhiGang” event was exposed by southern metro polis has abolished the central government’s Internment and repatriation policy. The great development of watchdog journalism is due to the support of the party and the government.

## Literature review

Lots of Chinese watchdog journalism researches are from the perspectives of media commercialization, media professionalism, media publicity, and journalism practice. For example, YueZhi, Zhao (2000) argues that the rise of watchdog journalism is the result of the media's market reforms<sup>2</sup>. Jing Rong, Tong (2011) explored the flourishing of watchdog journalism in the 1990s and the fall in the 21th century from the journalism perspective<sup>3</sup>. Current researches ignore the discussion on how the

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<sup>1</sup> Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press: The Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility and Soviet Communist Concepts of What the Press Should Be and Do*.

F.S.シーバート・T.B.ピータスン・W.シュラム著、内川芳美訳（1966）、『マス・コミの自由に関する四理論』東京創元社、73-130 頁。

<sup>2</sup> YueZhi, Zhao(2000), *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line*.

<sup>3</sup> Jing Rong ,Tong (2011),*Investigative Journalism in China: Journalism, Power and Society*, New York : The Continuum International Publishing Group

state influences watchdog journalism. In addition, Cho LiFung (2007) reconsidered the state's role in the development of Chinese watchdog journalism and indicated the state's contradictory role in both promoting and stifling Chinese watchdog journalism which is different from western watchdog press context. But this research has not discussed the state's role changes on watchdog press during the different periods since the reforms and not analyzed the reason why the state's role changes.

Therefore, this paper sets out to analyze the state's influences on watchdog journalism by examining the state's role changes during the different periods since the reforms. And this study seeks to present a particular State-controlled institution within the Chinese watchdog press and one that is different from western watchdog press. In doing so, the study seeks to explore the following research questions: in Chinese authoritarian country,

1. How does the state influence watchdog journalism?
2. Does the state promote and stifle watchdog journalism?
3. What key factor contributes to the shift in the state's promotion and control?

According to the official definition, Chinese watchdog journalism (*Yulun Jiandu*) refers to public people through the media to watchdog on the implementation of the party and the government policy, criticize the party and government cadres' corruption and other various social problems (Yang, 2001). This means that the state allows watchdog press as a form of public expression. But at the same time, Chinese media also as the mouthpiece of the party and the government, plays the function of the party and the government's expression. Hence, in this paper, two variables – “the state expression” and “the public expression” will be used for analysis.

This study chose to adopt broad definition for Chinese watchdog journalism (*Yulun jiandu*). Chinese watchdog journalism has expanded not only to monitor those who exercise power, namely Party-state officials, but also to bring attention to any wrongdoing, including those committed by small-time crooks. Even reports about jaywalkers, imposters, unethical merchants selling fake baby formula, natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes (coverage of them often involves the cover-up of death tolls or loss of property). This peculiarity becomes tenable when placed in China's media context.

### **Methodology and data**

This study uses historical perspective to explore the process of the state's role changes on watchdog journalism and examine the state's dual role in both promoting and stifling watchdog journalism. Therefore, this study explores the state's role on watchdog press during 4 periods – in the 1980s (since the reforms – until 1989); after Tiananmen crackdown (1989-1992); in the 1990s (1992-until 2003); after 2003 (2003 – current). The reason for choosing these 4 periods is that the state's role on watchdog journalism has an obvious change in every period. It can present an unambiguous process of the state's role changes and examine the reason for this change.

The data are both from the party and the government's congress work reports, journalism regulations, the state leaders' statements, speeches for media, and from

other documents of media practice, media reporting.

## **Background**

Before the reforms, Chinese media which was commonly portrayed as a compliant mouthpiece of the party and government, played the traditional propaganda role to serve for the party-state. Chinese press was modeled after the Soviet Pravda model, which uses the press as a tool for class struggle and a tool for rallying the people to support Party policies. Chinese press organizations were fully subsidized by Party-state coffers and the Party exercised complete control over financial and personnel decisions of all news organizations.

Since the reforms, economic reform policies reduced the number of news organizations eligible for state subsidies. The press became responsible for its own economic survival and performance. This has changed the state-press relations. The state loosed its control for media. First, the party decentralized the business rights to media organization. Beginning in 1978, the state promoted the media market-oriented reforms actively. Secondly, the party-state allowed the media that not only plays as a mouthpiece of the state, but also as a watchdog and other roles. Under this background, Chinese watchdog press has a rapid growth. The rise of watchdog coverage is one of the most significant press development in post-1992 China. Watchdog coverage reflect the social instability that resulted from large-scale worker layoffs in money-losing state enterprises, dislocation of farmers and unfettered taxation abuses by local governments that accompanied China's accelerated market reforms. China's economic reform policies since 1978 have created tremendous growth but also concentrated collusion of power and money. Inequality increasingly came to characterize the path of Chinese economic development and this inequality created the social conditions that led to reader demand for watchdog reporting that exposes wanton abuses of official power, police abuse, unscrupulous business practices, tax exploitation and crime<sup>4</sup>. For example, in the late-1990s, famous watchdog press *southern weekend* influenced a whole generation of the Chinese population with its reports focusing on official corruption and care for powerless groups' needs. Although watchdog journalism suffered from a setback, it still has great influences on Chinese politics and society.

The state's role on watchdog journalism in the 1980s

During the 13<sup>th</sup> party congress in 1987, Premier Zhao Ziyang, for the first time, used the term *yulun jiandu* to stress the importance the media's watchdog role to monitor the Party and government. It is the first time that watchdog reporting is introduced in the party's official document.

Watchdog press's importance was stressed by the party because of the following broad political and social context. First, during the 1980s, the main task of the party-state is political reforms. The state needed to rely on the media to explore the road of political reforms and use the press criticism to promote the reforms. Since

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<sup>4</sup> Cho, Li Fung (2007), *The Emergence, Influence, and Limitations of Watchdog Journalism in Post-1992 China: A Case Study of Southern Weekend*, a Dissertation submitted for the PhD degree in Journalism and Media Studies Centre in The University of Hong Kong, p3.

the reforms, within the context of the ideological debates between the Dengists and the Maoists were settled in the Dengists' favor, the Dengists' reformist party leaders such as Zhao Ziyang supported watchdog press actively (Xia&Yuan, 2014). Secondly, the party-state's media recognition has an important change. The party-state not only regarded media as its mouthpiece, but also put forward the media as the mouthpiece of the people. It means that the "media as the mouthpiece of the people" theory can be regarded as a breakthrough in media role. In 1985, Premier Hu Yaobang stated :

"What is the way to describe our Party press? When succinctly summed up, above anything else, it is the Party's mouthpiece. Naturally, this means it is also the mouthpiece of the government and the mouthpiece of the people. However, since the Party serves the people whole heartedly, and the Party line and policies originates from the masses, and goes back to the masses, then it goes without saying that the Party press is exercising its mouthpiece function when it effectively transmits information from the top down, as well as from the bottom up, ensuring that the Party and people are in close communication by speaking on behalf of the people, and ensuring that the people's need to know is satisfied"<sup>5</sup>. This means that the party allowed media's public expression function as appose media's traditional expression for the state.

In Zhao's 13th Party Congress report, Section 5, under the banner of creating a systematic communication channel between the Party and society, Zhao set out three principles for China's press: (1) the press should exercise oversight over the work and conduct of public officials. This concept was expressed by the phrase "supervision by public opinion" (*yulun jiandu*); (2) the press should inform the public of important events, expressed by the phrase (*zhongda shijian rang renmin zhidao*) ; (3) the press should reflect public debates on important issues expressed as (*zhongda wenti rang renmin taolun*)<sup>6</sup>.

There are several important meanings in Zhao's speech. First, the fact that Zhao sought to use the press to increase government transparency, to open up channels of communication between the Party and the general public, and to give the general public a sense of ownership over the government was, in effect, an endorsement of the concept of people's right to know. Secondly, Zhao's call for the media to represent the voices and criticisms of the masses in serving its watchdog function is effectively allowing the Chinese press to become a public channel to expose the Party's shortcomings and to combat official abuse. Zhao's construction of watchdog press (*yulun jiandu*) is significant as it, for the first time in Chinese Party history, promoted a public process for the press to check on official power in the public's interest. With the blessing of the Chinese Communist Party, through watchdog press, a public channel was created for the press to expose official wrong doing and to report and reflect the views of the general public<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Yaobang Hu, *Concerning the Work of the Party Press [a]* [*Guanyu Dangde Xinwen Gongzuo*], ed. Xinhua she xinwen yanjiu suobian, *Xinwen Gongzuo Wenxian Xuanbian [C]* (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Zhao Ziyang, "Advance Along the Road of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics [*Yanzhe You Zhongguo Tese De Shehui Zhuyi Daolu Qianjin*].

<sup>7</sup> Cho, Li Fung (2007), *The Emergence, Influence, and Limitations of Watchdog Journalism*

Watchdog journalism in this period showed a clear reform of color, often criticized the existing institutions. For example, *The People's Daily*, the official Party organ, criticized the emerging "administrative-business complexes" in a front-page commentary as a fundamentally unfair and corrupting institution. Another example is the "Ministry of Commerce Minister eat without paying" reporting. *Chinese Youth Daily* published this event in the first edition, and also published commentary "reformer, summon up your courage". The character of watchdog reports in this period is that from a "small event" to rise to the deficiencies and shortcomings of the economic, political, cadre institutions. Through the "small specific event" reporting, watchdog journalism expressed the criticism for the institutions.

#### The state's role on watchdog journalism after Tiananmen crackdown

However, after Tiananmen crackdown, the political reforms ended, the press reforms and so on. The reformist liberal leader Zhao Ziyang fell from power and was blamed for "guiding the media in the wrong way". Political uncertainty and unrest had brought about a new wave of Party policy that attempted to stifle the press' watchdog function. After Tiananmen crackdown, the party-state's cognition on watchdog press has a great change. The state's guidelines and policy on watchdog press in this period has a great impact on today's media policy.

In this period, the party reemphasized the media's "party principle" (*Dangxing Yuanze*) which is the central concept that guides China's press. This notion can be traced back to 1921, when the CCP founding congress stated that the Party's central executive committee will manage all journals, daily publications, books and booklets and that neither central nor local publications are allowed to carry articles that oppose the Party's principle, policies and decisions. Jiang Zemin replaced Zhao as the Chinese Communist Party Secretary and reemphasized the media's "party principle". In November 1989, Jiang Zemin in his "on the party's news work on Several Issues" speech, stated "our press work is an important part of the whole of the party works. Therefore, press work must adhere to the party principle".

The media's "party principle" inevitably reflected in the party-state's cognition on watchdog press. In this period, the party has put forward the two principles: "positive propaganda's priority" and "guide and direct public opinion". These 2 principles which have been used up to now are the guiding principle of China's media policy. In November 1989, The Politburo member Li Ruihuan, who was in charge of ideological work, stressed that the Chinese press must give priority to the Party's positive propaganda<sup>8</sup>. And at meanwhile, Jiang emphasized that the press should

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*in Post-1992 China: A Case Study of Southern Weekend*, a Dissertation submitted for the PhD degree in Journalism and Media Studies Centre in The University of Hong Kong, pp77-78.

<sup>8</sup> Li, *Guidelines That Insist on Giving Priority to Positive Propaganda* [a] [*Jianchi Zhengmian Xuenchuan Weizhu De Fangzhen*]. Li said the Chinese press must "publicly declare that that it speaks from the standpoint of the Party and the people; politically, it must remain on the same page as the Party; stick to the facts, seek the truth, do not lie; communicate closely with the masses, sincerely live amongst the people, share hardships, love and hate together, accurately reflect their wishes, cries, and demands; submit to the Party's leadership, and observe propaganda discipline.

ensure that watchdog press (*yulun jiandu*) serve to “guide and direct” public opinion toward stable economic and social progress under the Party’s leadership<sup>9</sup>. The official term used, known as *zhengmian xuanchuan weizhu* or “positive propaganda’ priority”, in Li’s speech and *yulun daoxiang* or “guidance of public opinion”, in Jiang’s speech marked the formal affirmation that the Party’s interest must always have priority. These two principles shows that the Party play a key role in framing, directing and overseeing watchdog press is a clear shift away from Zhao ZiYang’s more liberal conception of the practice. According to Li and Jiang’s formulation, the overriding role of the watchdog press must be to serve overall state agenda. In this period, the party-state emphasized that media as a form of Party’s interest expression must always have priority than public’s interest expression and attempted to stifle the press’s watchdog function. This shift from emphasizing the watchdog role to *zhengmian xuanchuan weizhu* , or “positive propaganda’ priority” and *yulun daoxiang*, or “guidance of public opinion” reflected a basic departure from the party’s policy in the 1980s.

#### The state’s role on watchdog journalism in the 1990s

After Tiananmen crackdown, from 1989 to 1991, the reforms stagnation lasted for several years until Deng XiaoPing made the “Southern-tour” in 1992, in which the old man bypassed central leadership and advocated a deepening of economic reform. In the 1990s, the focus of the party's work shifted to the economic system reform. So the party put forward that the media should serve the economic reform. From the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> party congress, the party used the term watchdog press( *Yulun Jiandu*) in working reports and promoted the watchdog press strongly. Because of the party-state’s supports, Chinese watchdog journalism first experienced a boom in the 1990s.

The reason for the party's support for the watchdog journalism comes from the deep social background. Market reform has resulted in serious corruption in the party, abuse of powers by local governments and social ills. This has caused public discontent. The first social problem was the low, and even fake quality of commodities and commercial services. This problem damaged the interests of ordinary people who were losing their confidence in the Socialism economic market, and this therefore worried the top leadership. The second social problem was the serious party cadres’ corruption. According to the Party’s Prosecution Department, 122,476 cases relating to corruption and bribery were put on file for investigation and prosecution in 1995. In the same year, more than 4000 officials from all administrative levels were declared guilty and sent to prison (Lin 2003). These social problems threatened the authority of the party-state.

To promote public faith in government, the Central government began to actively encourage watchdog journalism as a means for combating local official corruption, and even fake goods. For example, in 1992, with the support of the State Council, the Chinese Journalism Cultural Promotion Committee and the People’s Daily organized a national news reporting campaign involving 20 news media

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<sup>9</sup> Zemin Jiang, "Issues in the Party's Journalism Work," in *Selections from Documents on Journalism*, ed. Journalism Research Institute of Xinhua News Agency (Beijing: Xinhua Press, 1990)

organizations to critically scrutinize poor quality products.

And the state also used watchdog press as an administrative tool for strengthening Party cadres and social control. The best example of this form of watchdog journalism is China Central Television's Focus news program. One award-winning episode exposed the misappropriation of national funds earmarked for payment of farmers for harvested grain. The funds went into failed investment schemes. China Central Television and Focus both function at the central government level. Therefore, the reporters of Focus report directly only to Central level Party and government officials and enjoy the protection of the central authorities when officially investigating wrongdoing at the provincial or local level.

During this period, watchdog reports focused on social problems in social transformation, showing a obvious social interests value. The subjects of watchdog reports reported in the 1990s can be broadly classified into five types: (1) the wrongdoings and corruption of local government officials, (2) social problems existing within society, for example, environmental problem, (3) major and key criminal cases, (4) social injustice encountered by vulnerable populations, and (5) democratic events such as elections<sup>10</sup>.

The state's role on watchdog journalism after 2003

Chinese watchdog journalism experienced a boom in the 1990s and made a great leap in 2003 (Branigan , 2010); but soon after this, it suffered from a setback as a result of serious pressures from the Party-State. In 2003, the state's attitude toward watchdog press had an important change. After 2003, the state strengthened its control for the watchdog press. The reason for the state's change is that since the 1990s the watchdog press which gained the state's strong support has gradually expanded the editorial autonomy. Entered in the 2000s, the media gradually challenge the bottom line of the party, often beyond the party-state's rule. Watchdog reporting during the 1990s was supposed to help facilitate the implementation of the central policy in localities, and ensure that the local implementation was in accord with the always-correct-grand-policy of the CCP and was also under the control of the CCP. However, entered in the 2000s, watchdog reporting started to turn around their guns and called the central policies and policy making of the central government into question. The party is trying to limit the scope and scale of "media supervision" to a manageable level, while Chinese journalism is struggling to break through the boundaries set by the party.

Both SARS reporting and the case of Sun Zhigang are two outstanding examples of this. The case of SARS is one in which Chinese media, especially the media in Guangdong Province, successfully forced the central government to give up its stubborn traditional approach towards risk communication. SARS reporting has broken the party's ban on reporting. And media questioned the government to conceal the truth.

The case of the Sun Zhigang event reporting was also seen as a breakthrough in

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<sup>10</sup> Jing Rong ,Tong (2011),*Investigative Journalism in China: Journalism, Power and Society*, New York : The Continuum International Publishing Group, p.41.



Chinese journalism. In 2003, Sun Zhigang, a migrant worker in Guangzhou, was arrested for not carrying his ID card. He was beaten to death by local officials. *Southern Metropolis Daily* investigated and exposed the brutal event that led to a nationwide social movement and a change in the constitution. Sun Zhigang event reporting challenged the political authorities. And this reporting set agenda for the public and the latter actively participate in discussions about the issues raised by watchdog reports. In Sun Zhigang event reporting, several jurists have appealed for a revision of the regulation in the name of the Chinese citizens (Zhao 2008). The public expression and anticipation of lawyers, scholars and ordinary peoples has caused the state's wariness.

After 2003, The party's public declarations are actually a way in which the Party attempts to keep watchdog journalism under its control and to grab the right to define what watchdog journalism should be and should do. In this way, the Party strengthens that watchdog journalism should be in accordance with the propaganda needs of the Party. For example, in the 2004 regulation, the party reiterated that "news media should stick to the Party Principle, obey news rules and occupational ethics, correctly guide public opinion when practicing media supervision, and pay attention to the social influences of media supervision.

Furthermore, *Liaowang* Magazine, a current affairs news magazine launched by Xinhua News Agency in 1981, stressed again that media supervision is part of the work of the Party and the government, and further introduced ten rules for the practice of media supervision.

In September 2004, in government documents, the criticism of the party and government by media is strictly limited.

The attempt of the central Party to limit the practice of watchdog journalism was further expressed by the issuing of the 2005 document that banned cross-regional media supervision<sup>11</sup>, which is a major genre of Chinese watchdog journalism. This is regarded as a symbol of the tightening grip of the authorities over the media. Cross-regional media supervision is a prominent characteristic of Chinese watchdog journalism. In September 2004, seventeen provinces and municipal cities signed and delivered a statement to central government to appeal for the forbidding of cross-regional reporting in consideration of regional stability and economic development. The central propaganda department publicized a document, which banned cross-regional media supervision, in May 2005.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper used a historic perspective to explore the state's role on Chinese watchdog journalism. In classic liberal theory, the western independent watchdog

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<sup>11</sup> In the Chinese press system, the Party Committee is responsible for newspapers at the same administrative levels as the Party Committee. Newspapers need to obey order and accept governmental censorship at the same administrative level, and they cannot criticize government(s) at the same or higher levels. There are lacunae in the control of local government over media at higher administrative levels and over media from other cities (Tong 2010).

press has the pre-condition that is noninterference from the state for the media. But in authoritarian China, the state is dominant control power for media. This paper presented a particular State-controlled institution within the Chinese watchdog press and one that is different from western watchdog press.

This paper found that in authoritarian china, the state plays an active role on supporting and promoting watchdog journalism. But at meanwhile, the state also plays a contradictory role in both promoting and stifling the watchdog press. Through an historic analysis for the the state's policy on watchdog journalism, the state' role has a shift between promotion and control. This depends on the state's attitude changes between the media as a form of the state's interest expression and media as a form of the public interests expression.

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