

News Crusaders: Constructing journalistic professionalism within the confines of state control and commercial pressure

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Introduction

Publication of news stories exposing government corruption has enjoyed an unprecedented growth in the People's Republic of China over the last decade. This growth is tied to China's market reform and news organizations' response to reader demand for muckraking journalism. It is also encouraged by the conditional tolerance of a Central government that sees such reports as an effective tool for promoting political legitimacy and stability by helping to reign in local government corruption and providing an outlet for public discontent.

Chinese readers have embraced these stories and elevated the reporters and news organizations that publish them to celebrity status, even referring to them as "News Crusaders"². It is not unusual for reporters from investigative journals to be literally swamped by hordes of people seeking their help to expose the story of an official who abused or deprived them of some right. The success of this new breed of investigative reporting is all the more significant insofar as it would have been all but impossible to publicly write of government corruption or social injustice in the Chinese press but 10 to 15 years earlier.

But the newfound commercial success and expanding social authority of Chinese investigative reporting is already threatened. To be certain, the potential for official government repression remains the backdrop for China's journalistic "champions of justice" as is amply demonstrated by recent events like the temporary shutdown of *China Youth Daily's* critical and highly popular '*Freezing Point*' [*Bing Dian*]. But despite this and similar events, the backdrop of political control is one from which the new investigative reports first emerged and one within which it continues to cautiously grow amid the ebb and flow of official government control. It is, for better or worse, a 'sunk-cost' of political reporting in Mainland China. The new threat to investigative reporting would come from what Chinese media scholar called "the commodification of the media", which is made worse in China, by an

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<http://cmp.hku.hk>

² In China, investigative reporters are known by many names including "news hero", "lone rider", and frequently as *daxia*, (Yang, 2006), which is loosely translated as a "knight" (like the knights of King Arthur). But *daxia* more accurately refers to a person adept in martial arts and given to chivalrous conduct. The term "News Crusaders" is the author's attempt to find a culturally comparable western term to the idea of the Chinese *daxia*.

authoritarian political system which often acts in collusion with the media market that is still monopolized by the government (Zhan, 2004). This combined pressures of continued political control with unfettered commercialization, making the need for professional journalistic standard all the more urgent (Lu, 2005).

In many instances, reports have descended beneath the level of sloppy reporting into outright fabrication and blackmailing. Businesses and individuals report being presented by reporters with as-yet unpublished scandalous or highly critical stories about them and 'encouraged' to place an advertising order with the paper in order to facilitate editing or elimination of the proposed article. In one other case, journalists spectacularly violated professional ethics by persuading a young girl to go through with a liver donation operation in anticipation of reader demand for such a human interest story. The paper's circulation soared. Such abuses are becoming increasingly widespread and are coming to be known by the Chinese reading public. The revelation of these journalistic practice damage the credibility not only of the news organizations that commit them but of all investigative reporters and threaten to wash away the accomplishments of China's legitimate investigative reporters in a tide of new-found reader cynicism.

The threat posed by a vacuum of journalistic standards has increasingly become a focus for serious journalists in China. Presented with the challenge of maintaining the trust of their readers Chinese journalists and media scholars have struggled to identify the professional principles and practices that constitute good journalism and to apply these practices in a way that will commit journalists to real investigative reporting instead of irresponsible reporting and innuendo.

One news organization stands out as an example of legitimate investigative journalism's efforts to identify and implement the practices that accomplish these goals. *Southern Weekend* is a leading Chinese newsweekly whose success in the late 1990's was built on its groundbreaking anti-corruption stories and its reputation for journalistic integrity. Despite recent editorial and personnel upheavals, *Southern Weekend* retains its reputation as a leading investigative news organization committed to exposing wrongdoing and examining the social problems accompanying China's rapid economic development. What practices and principles did *Southern Weekend* adopt to gain and maintain the trust of its readers and in what ways was the process affected by China's authoritarian political environment?

This paper uses Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel's *Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* as an analytical framework for examining *Southern Weekend's* process of defining and pursuing its professional and journalistic identity. This paper applied what the book called "enduring principles that define journalism as a profession and calling," (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001) the belief that good journalism is about good method – as in the example that though journalists' may not always be objective, their methodology could be.

Through analysis of their news reports and interviews with *Southern Weekend* journalists, this paper looks at *Southern Weekend's* journalistic methods, news gathering networks, use of sources and documents, compensation and incentive system, and the development of an organizational culture that enabled the paper to provide its readers with accurate accounts of social problems and official corruption within the context of official political restraints and growing commercial pressure.

Background

Southern Weekend investigative reporter Zhai arrived in the small Chinese town late at night, trying hard to look inconspicuous. He checked into a hole-in-the-wall hotel using a fictitious name. He is not so foolish as to show his *Southern Weekend* business card. From past reporting experience, he has learned that if local officials found out a *Southern Weekend* journalist is in town, it could mean a quick invitation to get out of town, either through physical coercion or other no-less effective persuasive techniques.

But somehow the local people caught wind that a *Southern Weekend* journalist was in town, so from 9 o'clock that evening until three in the morning, local residents lined up at his hotel room, knocking on his door, sending notes, pleading to tell him about their plight. They talked for hours about how local authorities oppressed them or of how the police had harassed them. "None of the stories were publishable, but the people held such high esteem for *Southern Weekend* so I had to listen to all their cases. It took up a lot of my time" (Zhai, 2004).

Southern Weekend is widely regarded in China as a leading example of a growing breed of publication that is creating a niche market in China with its muckraking reporting and hard-hitting commentaries. Its bold headlines and in-depth investigative reporting uncovering abuses of power and government corruption have arguably redefined news and how it is covered in China (Chen, 1998; Lu, 2005; Sun, 2003).

Based in Guangzhou, one of China's largest southern cities, the weekly paper has a national circulation of 1.4 million. *Southern Weekend* was first established in 1984 as a weekend cultural supplement to *Southern Daily*, the official mouth-piece of the Guangdong Province Communist Party Committee. Though already commercially successful, it wasn't until the mid-1990's that *Southern Weekend* gained national and international prominence for its passionately recounted stories of common people victimized by official corruption or simply left behind by the country's market reforms, a significant departure from China's traditional party-state media which more often than not, reported on party activities and published official directives.

Its news reporting reflected the fermenting social instability that accompanied large-scale worker lay-offs in money losing state enterprises, dislocation of farmers, and unfettered taxation abuses by local governments that gripped China after Deng's call to accelerate market reform. It also cultivated a new generation of watchdog reporters like Zhai whose aims and activities reflected the evolving environment of Chinese journalism.

Zhai's generation of reporters has come to be known as *fenqing*, which literally means "angry youth" (Qian, 2003a; Zhai, 2004). Influenced by China's open door policies, the young people of this generation were well educated, had strong personalities and independent minded. They also had a sense of social justice and compassion that was a throwback to the by gone era of socialism. Distinctively different from other generation of *Southern Weekend* journalists who silently bore the scars of the Cultural Revolution, nor like their older brothers and sisters who took their demands for democracy to Tiananmen Square in the name of the common good, they preferred moderate but continuous reform over radical change. "Strictly speaking, we are not revolutionaries. Pure revolutionaries don't value the lives of the masses or their own lives. They are willing to sacrifice themselves to accomplish something. For us, we value our interests as much as our lives. We believe in moderate breakthroughs by working within safe boundaries" (Zhai, 2004).

The accelerated economic reform policies of the 1990's would encouraged them to expect immediate gratification and reward for their labor, a clear departure from the communist era, where work value was based on long term commitment and recognition. The new generation turned its energy to extending personal freedom and individual rights and achieving financial independence.

So it should come as no surprise that *Southern Weekend's* eventual success in attracting and establishing a team of talented investigative reporters had very much to do with its highly competitive remuneration and creative compensation scheme.

Government and organizational reform policies would play crucial roles in providing *Southern Weekend* with the economic resources and independence it needed to amass a team of experienced investigative reporters. One such government reform policy established in 1983 allowed individual media organizations to keep after-tax profit for reinvestment. By 1993, in an effort to push *Southern Weekend* towards financial independence, flagship paper *Southern Daily* allowed *Southern Weekend* to establish its own finance and distribution departments, allowing the subsidiary to take 10% of its profit for employee bonuses.

While other media groups are known to use their return on profit to purchase new state-of-the-art office buildings, start hotel businesses, or even purchase fancy company cars and cell phones for their employees, *Southern Weekend* would use this 10% return on profit to recruit the best investigative reporters from all over the

country. This would prove critical to establishing *Southern Weekend's* journalistic credibility as a muckraking newsweekly. A former news page editor, recalled how even as early as the mid 1990s, there were already an overrun of fake reports in China which made readers lose faith in the media. It was critical that *Southern Weekend* do their own investigative reporting and not be led by others (Shen, 2002). Indeed, prior to the assembly of *Southern Weekend's* own national reporting force in 1997 nearly all reports on events outside of Guangzhou city came from freelance writers whose reporting quality –especially for critical and investigative issues- could not be consistently relied upon.

Southern Weekend investigative reporters interviewed consistently cited competitive pay and personal fame being as important to them as altruism and the reporting for the public interest. The demand for compensation and recognition, would serve as a key step toward the concept of journalistic professionalism at *Southern Weekend*.

In 1992, Deng Xiaoping's call for accelerated economic reform created tremendous growth but also concentrated power and money to an extent unseen prior to liberation in 1949. Inequality increasingly came to characterize the path of Chinese economic development and this inequality was keenly felt by the general population.

Throughout the mid 1990s, the Chinese central government continued to recognize the threat posed by corruption and instituted numerous campaigns to eradicate police abuse, tax exploitation and local crime. In a bid to bolster its legitimacy, the central government encouraged efforts to use the media as a means of curbing local government corruption and unruly and dysfunctional bureaucracies.

After former-premier Zhao Ziyang made an explicit public endorsement of this concept of watchdog journalism at the 13th Party Congress in 1987, three subsequent premiers, including Li Peng in 1997, Zhu Rongji in 1998 and Wen Jiabao in 2003 have each visited China's highest-rated watchdog reporting TV program *Focus on China Central Television (CCTV)* and called for the continuation and further strengthening of the media's watchdog role.

Southern Weekend's watchdog journalism thus emerged and grew within the gap between the 'the legitimacy imperative of the Party-state leadership, the credibility imperative of the commercial news media and the professional and social imperative of journalists (Zhou, 2000).

There was a mass market for such journalism chronicling and decrying corruption and inequality. *Southern Weekend* increasingly found itself compelled by reader demand to expose official malfeasance. *Southern Weekend's* commercial success would give rise to other publications, particularly news magazines and metro dailies which were eager to cash in on the "anti-corruption" wave.

The dual pressures of continued government censorship along with unfettered media competition have given rise to questionable ethical practices where investigative reporting has become a commodity to be exchanged for the personal gain of the journalists. July last year, journalist Wang Deyin e-mailed a biting report to a private firm asking it to pay a ten-thousand dollar “gag fee” to keep the story from running (Bandurski, 2006). In one other case, journalists in the city of Chengdu spectacularly violated professional ethics by persuading a young girl to go through with a liver donation operation in anticipation of reader demand for such a human interest story (Li & Tang, 2005). Or in another case, reporters from *Xinhua News Agency*, China’s official press agency, were found taking bribes from mine owners in exchanged for dropping their investigative report on a mining disaster that killed 37 workers. The whistle blower, an investigative reporter from *China Youth Daily*, admitted though he was determined to hold the perpetrators accountable, the decision to expose his journalistic peers was an extremely difficult decision to make (Liu, 2004). These different varying forms of “checkbook journalism”, the act of journalists taking money in exchange of covering up an expose, or conversely, in exchange of doing a positive report, are unfortunately becoming more common place.

Commercialization of China’s media may have provided key ingredients for the increased autonomy of China’s press. But commercialization is by no means a guarantee of continued press freedom and integrity. It provides no guarantee for the press’ ongoing commitment to reporting the truth. In fact the commercialization and commodification of the media may even impede true press autonomy especially where a flawed political system acts in collusion with the market (Zhan, 2004). The pressures of market competition and the responses from the Chinese media to those pressures would seem to confirm threat posed to journalistic integrity by media commodification.

Research question:

In light of the dual forces of commercial pressure and the relentless state control, what practices and principles did *Southern Weekend* adopt to gain and maintain the trust of its readers and in what ways has the process been affected by China’s authoritarian political environment? And in an effort to answer the principle question posed by the AMIC 2006 conference, to what extent has *Southern Weekend* fulfilled its mission and objectives with respect to the public interest and to their fundamental societal obligations?

Literature Review

“Journalistic professionalism” is widely seen by Chinese journalists and media scholars as an imported Western concept applied to a long Chinese cultural tradition of journalists be intellectuals (Lu & Pan, 2002). As elites of the society that have

been in and out of power, whether during pre-communist or communist time, Chinese journalists are driven by the same sense of social responsibility that can be traced back to Confucian traditions.

One area of research looked at the changing Chinese press models, from-- Confucian liberalism, Maoism, and Communist capitalism to look at the changing role of the journalist as intellectuals via various political traditions, emphasizing on the political system in which journalists operate in and how that influences the journalists' role in society. It argued that although the introduction of commercialization into the current Communist capitalism model meant media enjoy greater autonomy, one condition often associated with the western ideal of journalistic independence, this freedom should be construed as "negative freedom". In so far that freedom is gained while chipping away at state control, freedom is lost to the ushering in the increasing domination of the commercial logic. As media continued to be consolidated under the party-state patronage and control, what results is not an increase in journalistic discipline and ethics, but rather, a strange collaboration of power and money, will continue to jeopardize the development of journalistic professionalism (Lee, 2005).

Another area of study focused on how shared "culture", that nebulous complex of tradition, social psychology and domestic habit which conditions a given unit of people, and differentiates them from others, fashioned how the Chinese journalists see their role as being driven by a sense of altruism towards society (Burgh, 2003). It is a journalistic ideology based upon the notions of public service and public interests, a throw back to the Confucian notion of social responsibility (Lu & Pan, 2002).

The third area focused on how, in the process of wresting control of their work from external domination, they achieve a limited degree of "professionalism". These studies analyze the dynamics of interactions between news organization, professional initiative for autonomy, and China's media system (Lu & Pan, 2002; Pan, 2000; Polumbaum, 1990). Again, the professional initiatives for autonomy is similarly driven by the Chinese tradition that edify journalists as public intellectuals whose role is to inform and enlighten the people, to work for the welfare of the people, and speaking on behalf of the people.

But in addition to this "cultural" drive is also a real sense of Chinese journalists striving to apply certain characteristics of "professionalism" identified by western sociologists; for example, training, impose own rules of ethics or practice on one another, having possession of skills based on theory, agreed educational qualifications, mutual competence testing, adherence to codes of conducts and social responsibility (Burgh, 2003). But these standards for journalistic professionalism, argued South American media scholar Silvio (Waisbord, 2000) "remain as elusive as ever, as there is no unified set of principles that define and rule journalistic work, particularly because there is ambiguity surrounding the ideal of professional reporting

and limitations on U.S. – styled professional journalism”.

It is in search of this unified set of principles that this paper chose to use “the enduring principles that define journalism as a profession and a calling.” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001) set out by the authors of *Elements of Journalism: what newspeople should know and the public should expect* as an analytical framework to look at *Southern Weekend’s* developing journalistic professionalism. The writing of *The Elements of Journalism* is an attempt by authors Kovach and Rosenstiel and a group of 25 American journalists and media scholars to identify the universal attributes that define journalism. The final publications of these “elements of journalism” were the end result of two years’ effort, which included 21 public forums attended by 3,000 people, collection of testimony from more than 300 journalists. Many of the nine elements identified are based on the basic idea that good journalism is about good method. For example, the age of debate over journalistic objectivity was reframed to be about the objectivity of method rather than objectivity of the journalists. This paper attempts to test how these enduring principles hold up against Chinese journalist’s pursuit for journalistic professionalism within the confines of state control and commercial pressures. Due to limited space, this paper will discuss five of the nine elements of journalism. Drawing on various types of political tradition, cultural perspective as well the journalist’s own initiative to gain autonomy, this paper hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the rise, aspirations, and limitations of China’s news crusaders.

Methodology

Over 40 in-depth interviews, most averaging over two hours each, were conducted with mainland Chinese journalists and media scholars, half of whom were current or former *Southern Weekend* journalists. Some interviews were conducted during the writer’s 2002 internship at the *21st Century Herald*, a sister publication founded by former *Southern Weekend* journalists. The bulk of the interviews were conducted during the *Southern Weekend* journalists’ stay at the University of Hong Kong’s Journalism and Media Studies Centre as visiting fellows with the Centre’s China Media Project from 2003 to 2006.

As the paper is part of the author’s on-going thesis research, interviewees have not yet released permission to use their full names. Accordingly, the interviews are identified primarily by their surname, first initial, and interview year. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were categorized into coded reading guides for easier access and analysis. Much of the interviews addressed the broader question of the role of news crusaders and what motivates them, what is the function of watchdog journalism, what defines journalistic professionalism, what external and internal restrictions and censorship they face, and strategies they use to broaden the confines of news control in an effort to understand the broader questions in a larger

context.

There are of course limitations using interviews for academic study, as people interpret history the way they want history to be seen and the way they want to be remembered associated with that history. Obviously, these investigative journalists wish to safeguard their fame and reputations. As much as possible, only information that that have been verified by more than one person were used for this paper. But even with this effort to corroborate the statements and observations of individual *Southern Weekend* journalists it is important to make note of that organization's 'collective memory' and of the influence of that collective memory upon individual impressions and recollections. There is a collective memory shared particularly by former *Southern Weekend* journalists, what one *Southern Weekend* investigative reporter called, a "collective pathos." Therefore, whenever possible, the author verified information through other primary sources, such as *Southern Weekend* newspaper reports, as well as secondary sources such as news reports, literature and analysis related to *Southern Weekend* and China media reform.

ELEMENT #1: Journalism's first obligation is to tell the truth

"The journalistic truth – is more than mere accuracy. It is a sorting out process that develops between the initial story and the interaction among the public, newsmakers, and journalists over time. The first principle of journalism – its disinterested pursuit of truth – is ultimately what sets it apart from all other forms of communications."

Elements of Journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001)

Under the propaganda system, news was not seen as a commodity, but as a tool of the party to propagate its ideology. Newspapers were distributed by mandatory subscription to all relevant party-state departments, and not something one purchased at will at a newsstand down a street corner. Under the propaganda model, party news regulations determined news values. This arrangement often resulted in exceedingly clumsy attempts to impose official taboos and hierarchical regulations on coverage of daily events.

An example given by one *Southern Weekend* investigative reporter was how *China Central Television*, China's official mouthpiece, placed a piece on President Jiang Zemin planting a tree in celebration for earth day before news about then premier Zhu Rongji holding talks with the Canadian prime minister, a country which China has a two-way trade relationship worth US\$15.5 billion. Under propaganda journalism, news value is determined by government dictates as opposed to intrinsic news values (Zhao, 2004). Propaganda journalism, driven by the notion to guide public opinion, and to unify the masses towards the common goal of the party, result in news packages orchestrated by propaganda chiefs eager to showcase the positive work of

the party. One media scholar chidingly remarked that in propaganda journalism, “good news is news, and bad news simply doesn’t exist” (X. Li, 2001).

Southern Weekend represented a departure from this form of pre-packaged news. *Southern Weekend*’s founding editor Zuo Fang expressed his disillusionment with propaganda journalism with a phrase that has now famously become the credo of China’s latest generation of investigative journalists: “We [*Southern Weekend*] may have truths we cannot tell, but we will not tell lies.” Thus instead of the all-encompassing “disinterested pursuit of truth” set forth in *The Elements of Journalism* Chinese journalists are at this stage championing a less ambitious but more realistic “refusal to tell lies”. While a commitment merely to avoiding sins of commission versus those of omission clearly falls short of the journalistic ideal, the principle of “telling no lies” would nonetheless make *Southern Weekend* into one of China’s most politically significant publications in the market reform period.

Subsequent chief editors Jiang Yiping and Qian Gang would continue to follow this editorial vision by creating a paper that provided straight facts, information, and knowledge not orchestrated by government (Qian, 2003b). But the line between reporting and advocacy is drawn with far less clarity by *Southern Weekend* journalists than their counterparts in the West. In place of propaganda journalism, *Southern Weekend*’s eagerness to reject propaganda reporting and in Zuo Fang’s words, “to create a paper with compassion and that served the people,” often translates into the journalist role of advocating on behalf of the subjects it’s reporting, sometimes at the expense of reporting the story itself. In one instance, investigative reporter Yang was given an emergency assignment to write about a dispute between independent taxi companies and a taxi manufacturers owned by the Shanghai local government. The taxi company complainants crammed into Yang’s hotel room. Furious at the local Shanghai officials for refusing to intervene on the dispute, they began discussing mass demonstration strategies, which included organizing a massive blockade around the manufacturing plant in Shanghai to disrupt traffic all over Shanghai.

Rather than busy filing his report on the latest picketing strategies, Yang negotiated with the taxi drivers to delay their action. Yang called his friend who worked at China’s official press agency *Xinhua News Agency*, who in turn used the “red phonenumber”, which had direct access to top level officials in Beijing, to inform them of the brewing crisis. As a result of former Premier Zhu Rongji’s direct intervention, the Shanghai provincial leaders rushed out in the middle of the night to provide the taxi drivers initial guarantees for resolution. The next day, the Shanghai local officials met with the taxi drivers and manufacturer to come up with a compromising solution. The story Yang later submitted on the whole ordeal was ultimately pulled. Amongst the many reasons, *Southern Weekend* was pressured by the Shanghai government to drop the story as the crisis had been resolved. *Southern Weekend* ended up destroying all the papers that was just coming fresh off the printing press, incurring great financial loss.

Yang thought often afterwards about the role Chinese journalists should play. “China media’s function is not entirely just to provide society with the truth. The purpose of why we try to provide the truth, to a large extent, is to advocate on behalf of the people, to appeal to the government and the justice system to act on the problem, at the same time, through commercialized methods, satisfy the reading public to ensure monetary gains for the news organization”(Yang, 2006).

Southern Weekend journalists interviewed offered several rationalizations for their tendency towards ‘advocacy’ journalism. One explanation centers on their bitter personal experiences of *Southern Weekend* editors who survived the violent chaos of the Cultural Revolution, where the falsifying reports of grain production on the food supply for Chinese peasants went complete unchecked by a muzzled media, with catastrophic effects. “Media was instrumental in proliferating the disastrous excesses of the Cultural Revolution. Lies and inflammatory editorials filled the newspapers. Common sense and normal human behavior were cast aside; white was branded black and black white. The Gang of Four posses no special powers, yet by relentlessly imposing the policy of opinion uniformity, it was able to muzzle the entire nation. No trace of public grievance appeared in any news medium during their tenure” (Sun & Michel, 2001).

A second explanation has its roots even deeper in Chinese history and culture and taps into the longstanding tradition of Chinese intellectuals sense of duty and obligation to society in exposing official corruption and wrongdoing (Shen, 2002).

A third explanation for the ascendance of advocacy journalism argues that the new journalistic passion is not so much the product of political history or traditional cultural as “a reaction to present-day reality of an increasingly fragmented Chinese society”. For example, when the society’s institutions for resolving societal injustices such as government relief, judicial assistance, civil society aid organizations are dysfunctional, or when old style humanitarian support systems such as family organizations or extended family networks are either deficient or destroyed (referring to the period during the cultural revolution when families were commonly broken up to meet the needs of the party), other institutions and individuals will rise to the task to work for the public good. The media has assumed this role in present-day China (Yang, 2006).

Complementing Chinese journalists’ willingness to provide the information needed by Chinese citizens to make sense of their “fragmented society” was the constantly growing demand for useful information by China’s media consumers. The relatively weak institutional position of China’s law enforcement, court system, civil society and the nascent character of China’s political reform force the Chinese populace to seek semi-official sources of information to understand the shifting political and economic environment in which they live. The lack of government transparency mandates

recourse to ‘insider exposes’ to understand the machinations of the current political system. Media positioned at the fringes of government-private/state-market systems are especially well positioned to provide such information especially as concerns local government corruption.

This dysfunctional and fragmented society results in Chinese people holding journalists in especially high regard because they think the reporter can help them gain justice, they indirectly give reporters moral authority, thus creating a false sense of confidence in the reporter. In the long run, the reporter may develop a false sense of superiority or self-worth (Zhai, 2004).

The elevated status of investigative reporters can be dangerous. One journalist likened it to a rash and inexperienced mountain climber, who boldly climbs his first mountain and thinks with more boldness he will be able to climb another even higher mountain, but pays little attention to technique, tools, and increasing his understanding of the environment (Yang, 2006). This danger can manifest itself in the credibility that readers give to a popular reporter’s stories. A temptation arises to bank on one’s reputation and rely increasingly on unnamed sources and veiled accusations instead of solid reporting work.

Simply the desire to ‘advocate’ in the public’s interest or to rely on one’s boldness is not enough to ensure journalists will continue to pursuit the truth because censorship remain an ongoing threat and its presence can pressure reporters to “self-censor” simply to be able to see their work in print. Investigative reporters are constantly under political pressure to abandon a story they are investigating midway or to have their completed investigation be aborted at the last minute. An investigative story which had been in the works for weeks, may never see the light of day. Since reporters are often paid by the character for published articles repeated censorship of their pieces could mean working for weeks or months with virtually no pay. But in *Southern Weekend*, these questions do not exist due to several innovative compensation incentives (Y Li, 2005). For one, *Southern Weekend* journalists are not paid by how long their stories are, but rather they are judged and paid according to quality, which is rated by an editorial board. Another reason is *Southern Weekend* journalists are paid for the investigative report even if the report could not be published. As of January 2004, *Southern Weekend* reporters are paid 80% of the value of the story, if the story was censored (Zhai, 2004).

Besides its compensation policies, *Southern Weekend* also backs its reporters’ investigative pursuit of the truth through an unwritten internal policy that once an investigative topic is approved by the editorial team, the editorial team has in effect agree to assume the political risk involved rather than letting the reporter take the fall if any political pressure were to come down. This policy is particularly important as many of the investigators journalists are hired as “contract employees”, and their lack of job security make them particularly vulnerable to political pressure.

Whereas a reporter working for less innovative media organizations would need to consider whether a story can be done, and once it is done, whether it would be published. But in *Southern Weekend*, these questions do not exist for the reporter. Whether a story can be done is the reporter's problem, but whether a story can be published becomes the editor's problem. I think this is a very good policy. This policy allows the reporter to fully unleash their capabilities (Y Li, 2005).

ELEMENT #2: First loyalty is to citizens

“Rather than selling customer content, news people are building a relationship with their audience based on their values, on their judgment, authority, courage, professionalism, and commitment to community. The audience is not the customer buying good and services. The advertiser is. Yet the customer/advertiser has to be subordinate in that triangle to the third figure, the citizen.”

The Elements of Journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001)

Southern Weekend, was established as the result of a traditional party paper's effort to appeal to readers and advertisers by providing culture and entertainment news moving beyond its usual fare of government announcements, directives and ideological instruction. The government's allowance of this incremental editorial autonomy was an unintended by-product of the drive to ensure an economically self-sufficient media industry.

Prior to 1978, news organizations were state enterprises fully subsidized by Party-state coffers. The Party-state had complete control over financial and personnel decisions of all news organizations in China and the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications exercised a monopoly over distribution rights (X. Li, 2000). Economic reform policies in 1978 called for a reduction and eventual decrease of state subsidies to China's newspaper agencies in an attempt to make news organizations economically viable through sales of advertisements and newspapers rather than relying solely on revenue from the multiple party and government agencies required to subscribe to the publications. The government began taxing newspapers in 1983, and allowed the paper's sponsors to keep after-tax profit for reinvestment. This drive to ensure economic independence inadvertently gave news organizations increased power over editorial, financial, and personnel decisions. This also meant that the power to influence news organization's editorial decisions had, to some extent, transferred from the Party-state to advertisers and the reading public. News organizations would now not only have to please the Party-state, they would also have to please the public. Commercialization of the press thus brought about a divided loyalty, now there are two masters to serve instead of one, the party and the reader.

As *Southern Weekend's* readership by the mid 1990s included a burgeoning middle class most of who originally came from humble family backgrounds the paper increasingly turned its attention to addressing the social costs and dislocation that accompanied the nation's accelerated development under Deng Xiaoping's economic reform policies.

Slogans like "Let justice prevail, recall our conscience" and "Bear our history with a sense of mission, speak for the people" filled the paper's headlines. *Southern Weekend* came to symbolize giving voice to the voiceless masses that remained marginalized by China's rapid yet uneven economic growth.

Southern Weekend continued to respond to market pressure which demanded more corruption exposes. It kept distribution and street sale logs, and regularly discussed them during weekly staff meetings, where the cover story for the next issue are determined (Zhao, 2004). One investigative reporter illustrated how the July 11, 1997 issue with cover story entitled "How earthlings have fallen in love with Mars" sold so poorly that sales reportedly dropped by 100,000 copies. *Southern Weekend* immediately dropped the topic as a main headline subject (Qian, 2003b).

ELEMENT #3: Its essence is the discipline of verification

"The method is objective, not the journalist. The key was in the discipline of the craft, not the aim."

The Elements of Journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001)

A nationwide study on China's watchdog journalism found that although there is an overall increase in watchdog reporting in China, there is a disproportional problem of newspapers taking and copying other newspaper's investigative reporting without doing any of their own independent verification (Sun & Liu, 2003). The situation is made worse due to routine censorship restraints, newspaper agencies often would not bother wasting valuable resources to cover a story they fear would eventually get censored anyways. But when they realize the commercial gains a competing paper was earning by being bold enough to publish the story, and they are caught without any of their own independent reporting. Under commercial pressure and time restraint, they would simply copy what has been reported by other papers without any independent verification. This would become a vicious cycle of which either no one dares to report on a particular sensitive story, or everyone report on it in mob like fashion without any discipline of verification.

Southern Weekend would set themselves apart through their sense of independent judgment. One editor cited examples of how when all the papers around the nation were giving glowing coverage to a new vitamin product, *Southern Weekend* held their

own independent investigations on the product and ended up writing an expose.

Another example of *Southern Weekend's* commitment to independent verification is illustrated by the story on the "Case of the Severed Tongue", where a peasant's tongue was allegedly cut off by the Shanxi local police during interrogation. After a Shanxi local media broke the story reporting a peasant's tongue was 'severed', newspapers nation-wide immediately did followed-up coverage, repeating the same allegation that a peasant's tongue was amputated by police. Though tempted to report the same, *Southern Weekend* withheld their story in order to do their own independent investigation. It took repeated pleading by the *Southern Weekend* reporter to get the peasant to agree to be interviewed and to show his mouth injuries. Through the interview, it came to light that the *Southern Weekend* reporter was in fact the only one to arrive in person to interview the peasant and to see the actual mouth injury. After much investigation, the *Southern Weekend* reporter could only conclude in his story that the peasant's tongue "appeared to be shorter than a normal length tongue and appeared to be bruised" (Qian, 2003b).

In the Sever Tongue story, *Southern Weekend* was able to send its reporter to independently verify the story. But at other times, when a disaster happens in China, it is not uncommon for local government officials to arbitrarily institute news blackout. This happened during a massive food poison case in Tangshan city where hundreds of people, including many elderly and children, died from eating what was later found to be arsenic laced doughnuts. The credibility *Southern Weekend* established with their readers and colleagues would bring about an influx of daily phone calls and mail informing them of such news blackouts or official malfeasance and social injustices. Many of these phone calls would come from local media around the country. "Often they will inform us as soon as breaking news happens in their province. Due to *Southern Weekend's* established reputation for daring to report what others would not touch, local journalists would often invite *Southern Weekend* journalists to work in cooperation with them (Qian, 2003a). Sometimes it's because they can't report on it, or even if they report is, it won't be published. Sometimes they don't even bother going to the scene of the incident, they just call to tell us, and at times we arrive at the scene earlier than them" (Zhao, 2004).

As a subsidiary of *Southern Daily*, the official mouth-piece of the Guangdong Province Communist Party Committee, *Southern Weekend* technically has direct links to the Communist Party. Yet it continued to capitalize on its image of being an outsider, independent and marginalized. It is precisely this image that won credibility and legitimacy from news colleagues around the nation and from the general public. Even in Shanghai, one of the most politically tightly controlled cities in China, the *Southern Weekend* bureau regularly received 3-4 written leads, and even more phone calls for stories from the public each day. It was not uncommon to have little old ladies and men hanging outside of the bureau office crying and demanding *Southern Weekend* to help them with their case (Yang, 2004).

Southern Weekend's ever expanding network of sources would enable them to access many of the stories they normally could not get access to. Common sources of information come from victims of botched justice or fake products, fellow journalists from other papers, figures in organized crime and government officials who want to use the paper to expose an opponent or rival. Though these leads couldn't be ignored they required exceptionally thorough independent research, verification and corroboration to avoid being led into bogus investigative reporting. Another news source are retired Communist Party members, many of whom question the economic reforms of the 1990's and are especially distressed by the growth of official corruption accompanying the reforms. "Once these retired Party members get wind of who is a serious investigative reporter, they will spread the word amongst their fellow comrades" (Yang, 2004).

Just as there are those who want to share genuine information with *Southern Weekend* journalists, there are also those who want to mislead them. *Southern Weekend* journalists interviewed protect themselves through diligent reporting method such as multiple sourcing, cross referencing and checking for facts. They would also let some time pass before pursuing the story, all the while making phone calls to have trusted friends familiar with the case without any conflict of interest to verify the original lead (Yang, 2004).

Taking precautions such as these are not merely for the sake of professional reporting, but for self protection, as libel lawsuits against investigative reporters remain a constant threat. In one incident, *Southern Weekend* was involved in a one million RMB lawsuit (approximately USD\$130,000) for inaccurately reporting the number of public street lights that existed in a village that was recently named a world cultural heritage site. Although at the end *Southern Weekend* was order only to "apologize" for their mistake, with no fines instituted, nearly all lawsuits against journalists result in media side losing (Liebman, 2005). One key reason for this is that Chinese local court officials' salary come from the local government coffers. Obviously, the local government have tremendous influence over the local courts they preside over. Accordance with the Chinese Civil Procedure Code, the plaintiff can choose to file the lawsuit in the plaintiff's own locality which will usually also be the place where the alleged wrongdoing is to have happened. This means that in libel cases, the officials, businesses or individuals alleging libel against a news organization will usually bring their action within their own locality, making media cases nearly impossible to win.

The factual mistake in *Southern Weekend's* reporting is noteworthy, even though the mistake was just a small detail. One reporter cautioned that *Southern Weekend's* reporting style tend to lean towards journalism of assertion rather journalism of verification. "Assertion is fiction posing as nonfiction. Pretending omniscience or claiming greater knowledge than we have" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). One investigative reporter complained that his editor's writing style always wanted to

include what an interviewee thinks. “But how does a reporter know what a person is thinking? I can only say, ‘he says he thinks’, but my editor asks his reporters to write as if they are omnipotent, that is fiction writing and not news reporting. Another problem is often the news basic content is not there – time, location has not been dealt with. Every good news piece should have a sequence. The writing may be beautiful, but sometimes impassioned writing can skew facts. One should write about the facts in an even-handed manner (Zhao, 2004).

ELEMENT #4: Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover

It is this independence of spirit and mind, rather than neutrality, that journalists must keep in focus.”

The Elements of Journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001)

In marked contrast to the western liberal ideal of independent, if not adversarial media-government relations, China’s Communist Party press system requires it to practice an inter-dependent ‘constructive’ approach to Party-state-media relations. Under the Party press system, media organizations have always had quasi-official rights to write investigative reports subject to the range and influence of the administrative ranking of their sponsoring unit. This quasi-official right has to do with China’s top-down party press structure which is comprised of central, provincial and municipal levels. All major newspapers are sponsored by China’s Communist Party and its corresponding government departments or institutions and are subject to the overall regulation of the Party propaganda department. For example, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party publishes *People’s Daily*; the Chinese Communist Youth League publishes *China Youth Daily*, and the State Council’s Development Research Center publishes *China Economic Times* business daily. This model is replicated at the provincial and municipal levels. For example, in Guangdong province, *Southern Daily* is under the supervision of the Guangdong Province Communist Party Committee, while *Guangzhou Daily* is sponsored by the Party at the municipal level. This model applies to all of China’s provinces and cities. Thus all news organizations, regardless of market and commercial reform, are at least formally extensions of the Party-state. ‘

But in 1993, China Central Television’s *Oriental Time* news programme weakened the symbiotic relationship between media organizations and their corresponding Party-state sponsors by recruiting outside “contract reporters” or *qianyue jizhe* to produce their news programme. Contrary to the traditional hiring methods which required prolong, costly and bureaucratic authorization from all levels of the news agency, this market driven hiring method allowed news agencies to gain limited independence from their communist minders, making hiring and firing more flexible and competitive.

These competitive hiring methods would later be adapted and adopted by *Southern Weekend*, where those hired on “contract” were also known as “outside of the system” or *tizhiwai* and those who were still hired through traditional recruitment methods were “authorized employees” *bianzhi* and “within the system” or *tizhinei*.

Southern Weekend journalists who are “authorized employees” are hired by *Southern Daily*, the flagship paper, via traditional hiring venues such as Universities and trade schools. Once they are hired by *Southern Daily*, they are then assigned to their various subsidiaries, which included *Southern Weekend*. In addition to earning higher pay, “authorized employees” are given Guangzhou *hukou* (residency) and benefit packages which may include such perks as health insurance, and housing allowance. Though this gives employees formal status and financial security, the recruitment process can be highly inefficient and ritualistic and would include checks into ideological and family background as well as a thorough examination of the applicant’s public security dossier. In contrast, “contract employees” can be recruited off the streets, thus allowing the news organizations to efficiently respond to market demands.

Many of the investigative reporters hired by *Southern Weekend* as “contract employees” came from impoverished family backgrounds from China’s underdeveloped western regions. For many of them, working for *Southern Weekend* in a big city like Guangzhou meant increasing their earning power by many fold. But even so, as a contract employee for *Southern Weekend*, they are not given Guangzhou *hukou* (residency status). And without Guangzhou *hukou*, they cannot receive subsidies offered by Guangzhou province for health care and work insurance. In addition, they do not get the same level of perks offered by *Southern Daily*, such as housing allowances or year end bonuses. Moreover, the stark contrasts in pay, benefits and job security between “contract” and “authorized” reporters performing essentially the same jobs contributed to an unhealthy work environment between the two groups. Contract investigative reporters’ enjoy little job security as writing a story that offended a propaganda minder would probably lead to losing their job and consequently their ability to remain in Guangzhou (Yang, 2004). In contrast, “authorized employees”, even if reprimanded by propaganda minders could still be transferred to other units or departments in the parent paper *Southern Daily*. Ironically, this greater security provided the officially approved “authorized” reporters with greater latitude for uncovering government malfeasance than their more independently hired “contract” counterparts.

Nonetheless, the ability of *Southern Daily* to circumvent officially monitored and approved hiring procedures for its reporters contributed overall to its increasing ability to assert a form of independence from the subjects of its coverage, part of this was the greater job mobility that journalists enjoyed through the “contract” hiring system. It is now much easier for journalists to change jobs, whether one is “within

the system” or “outside of the system”. In the past, a person’s case file, pay, benefits, housing, *hukou* were all directly tied to one’s job unit, now, with modest reform (some which are technically illegal) to circumvent the restrictions, journalists now have greater employment choices and freedom (Yang, 2004).

In addition, *Southern Weekend* had had to come up with creative ways to try to even out the discrepancies caused by this double standard employment system. These include paying very competitive salaries in compared to other news agencies. According to one investigative reporter, during the 1998-2001 heydays at *Southern Weekend* he could earn as much as 10,000 RMB just by publishing two articles a month, a considerable salary even at that time. This salary amount covered his monthly salary, health coverage, insurance, and bonus. Moreover, reimbursements for work travel and other work related expenses were quite common and given freely (Yang, 2004).

ELEMENT #5: It must serve as an independent monitor of power and offer voice to the voiceless

Elements definition: watching over the powerful few in society on behalf of the many to guard against tyranny.

The Elements of Journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001)

As *Southern Weekend*’s reputation for exposing corruption expanded, journalists from other provinces and cities increasingly approached *Southern Weekend* with story leads they themselves could not report on or publish (Qian, 2003b) This presented *Southern Weekend* with opportunities to exploit inter-provincial power struggles as a means for moving beyond the officially established limits for investigative journalism.

Local power hierarchies limited local papers from writing critical reports on their ‘own turf’. The usual excuse local governments used to defend such news black out policies is that such stories threatened to destabilize the community and put off investors from bringing much needed investment capital into the region. At the same time as local protectionism stifled coverage of local issues, the officially sanctioned regionalism of government propaganda functions discouraged news media from covering scandals beyond their own county or provincial boundaries. But economic reform and media competition would change these dynamics. The course of China’s economic miracle created powerful economic incentives that undermined the media’s traditional reluctance to expose wrongdoings in other

Moreover, reporting on official malfeasance in distant provinces, though formally frowned upon, ultimately carried fewer risks than did exposing official wrongdoing within one’s own territory. So *Southern Weekend* took a calculated risk by being among China’s first news publications to regularly report on official malfeasance in

other provinces, known in Chinese literature as *kuadi jiandu*, loosely translated as 'inter-regional watchdog journalism'. The Zhang Jinzhu case in Henan province was one example of *Southern Weekend's* 'inter-regional watchdog journalism'. The story involved a grisly traffic accident, where local protectionist policy in Henan worked to the benefit of *Southern Weekend*.

In 1997, Zhang Jinzhu, a senior police officer, ran over and killed an 11 year old boy and dragged the boy's screaming father beneath his car for more than a kilometer before finally stopping. The local Henan press had all the details of the story but could not publish it because of officer Zhang's local power connections. The Henan reporters contacted *Southern Weekend* hoping that it would carry the story. *Southern Weekend* took the story and covered it in detail. The story led to a huge public outcry against police misdeeds and power abuse. The Henan courts swiftly tried officer Zhang and sentenced him to death. Then-editor Zuo Fang said during an interview that, 'once we had uncovered and reported cases of this kind, local authorities [in Henan] no longer dared to cover them up' (Sheridan 1998).

Southern Weekend's noted strategy to focus on corruption and malfeasance outside their home province of Guangdong to maximize muckraking reporting while minimizing political risk was noted by both Chinese scholars as a unique breakthrough from the confines of traditional government restrictions (Sun and Lu 2002, 84). But it was not without its critics or dangers. Some Chinese scholars and journalists questioned the journalistic viability and integrity of these methods, and even suggested *Southern Weekend* should change its name to 'Northern Weekend', alluding to the disproportionately northern focus of the paper's exposes.

Key central government officials have expressed support for watchdog journalism, but this support has not always translated into enthusiastic support at the provincial or local government level. Local governments continue to exercise full control over media ownership and licensing as well as the selection of top management for major media organizations under their jurisdiction. Local media exercise only the degree of autonomy granted by their local Party-state sponsors. Even in the early days of the People's Republic, provincial and local governments wielded a relatively greater share of power over people's everyday lives than did the central government. The decentralization of power accelerated after the deaths of powerful charismatic leaders like Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Provincial governments exercised a high degree of economic autonomy and frequently came into conflict with the Central Government or each other. These conflicts and the efforts of the Central Government to bring wayward provincial officials into compliance with Central directives on issues as diverse as taxation or environmental protection created opportunities for enterprising investigative journalists in *Southern Weekend* to pursue their trades (Qian, 2003a).

The market reality was that corruption stories, no matter the geographic

considerations, sold papers and generated significant tax revenue for the Guangdong provincial government. This revenue reinforced Guangdong provincial government's willingness to expend the political capital needed to deflect criticism and protect *Southern Weekend* from the wrath of other provincial leaders. This arrangement contributed to *Southern Weekend's* continued political survival and market success. A former editor explained that if *Southern Weekend* made more money, Guangdong province made more money, and in effect, they have more clout with the Central government to deflect any complaints or criticism from other provinces (Qian, 2003a). Another former editor amplified the importance of a liberal local leadership, 'at that time, the key was Li Mengyu, the President of the *Southern Daily Press Group*. These people silently carried the load, building a political platform to protect *Southern Weekend*. Without it, *Southern Weekend* couldn't report. Without their support, no editor in chief dared, or even if they dared, they wouldn't be able to last for long' (Zhao, 2004). The editor added that Fang Yujin, the current President of *Southern Daily Press Group* and his predecessor Li Mengyu frequently urged the *Southern Weekend* staff to, 'get the news out before the ban orders come!' (Qian, 2005).

Conclusion

Southern Weekend's fortunes and failures over the past 10 years reflect the most important trends in Chinese journalism and provide a fascinating glimpse at its future prospects.

One would be hard put to find a publication that has played a greater role in shaping the ability of Chinese watchdog to expose official corruption over the past decade than *Southern Weekend*. *Southern Weekend* reporters and editors faced-off against entrenched power elites both in their own and in distant provinces. Provincial \propaganda apparatchiks all over China met their match in the paper's crusading investigative reporters and editors who dared to write and publish explosive exposes of official abuse and corruption.

Market forces contributed to the ability of publications like *Southern Weekend* to test the bounds of Chinese muckraking journalism. But those same forces and the associated commodification of media, including news, scandal and revelations of official malfeasance and social injustice may ultimately present a greater challenge to the ability of publications like *Southern Weekend* to serve the Chinese Revolution. This threat takes two forms. First is the threat posed by commercial/government patronage. Officially sanctioned business interests are coming to increasingly dominate business reporting. This in turn is presenting an ever-increasing challenge to Chinese journalists to maintain their editorial professionalism and independence. Second is the threat posed by commercialization and commodification of the news

media. News media must increasingly compete for reader and advertising revenue. Pursuit of readers with the disposable income to purchase potential advertisers' products exerts its own pressures on both the nature and quality of news coverage. Salacious scandal and celebrity expose sell papers in China just as successfully as do such stories in countries with well-established market systems and tabloid-presses.

Southern Weekend, arguably one of the most influential investigative newsweekly established its journalistic credibility based on the simple principle of its refusal to lie, to provide information not orchestrated by the powers that be, and to unapologetically give voice to voiceless elements of Chinese society. *Southern Weekend* built its investigative reporting on its credibility, integrity and sense of social responsibility. But while its commitment to the stated goals of Chinese socialism may have provided the inspiration for its success it was the paper's adoption of practical measures like innovative remuneration schemes, editorial support for aggressive reporting and insistence upon solid sourcing of stories that encourage honest fact-based reporting. *Southern Weekend* journalists who were interviewed for this paper continued to associate the notion of "professional journalism" with credibility, tied with professional technique, method, fact based reporting, multiple sourcing and perspectives as much driven by fair remuneration as altruism, driven by career values as much social responsibility, valued western influence and training but not necessarily bounded to it.

To a limited extent, some media scholars argue that it may be due to government control and cultural tradition of socially responsible journalist, that the bottom line has not yet overtaken concerns for social and political considerations (Zhou, 2000). Although censors and government control cannot be overlooked by China watchers, neither should the pressures of the commercialization be underestimated. It is the Chinese journalists who will have to play key role in prioritizing state interests and social effects and refrain from exploiting the "shocking effects and commercial values of a potential exposure itself" (Zhou, 2000). Media scholars predict it is this active process of everyday struggle will continue to be waged around continued government control, journalistic Confucian ethos, market pressure, and the "emerging culture" of imported media professionalism (Lee, 2005).

Whether *Southern Weekend* has fulfilled its mission and objectives with respect to the public interest and their fundamental societal obligations unfortunately is not a judgment that can be made easily. On one hand, one could argue their influence was short-lived. As the political winds changed in 2002 and leadership of the paper were eventually replaced by propaganda chiefs who were no longer willing to tolerate their bites and eager to pull in the leash of this watchdog. On the other hand, *Southern Weekend* watchdog reporting broke new ground and stirred public debate, emboldening *Southern Weekend* to enter mine fields of muckraking reporting that other media initially avoided. The paper's willingness to cover and involve itself in politically sensitive topics reflected a conscious desire on the part of the editors and

staff to promote social change (Zhao, 2004). *Southern Weekend's* impact on China's media remained palpable, and will remain an indicator in the history of Chinese media.

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