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## Media in China after economic reform

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### Abstract

The Economic Reform in China, known as Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, was launched by Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping in 1978. He had given the idea to modernise the country's agriculture, industry, technology and military. The post-Mao leadership including Deng had many challenges. Due to the failure of the Great Leap Forward, mass famine and then the Cultural Revolution, the whole country was exhausted. Economic Reform had allowed the new leadership to overcome the past hurdles. They introduced many changes in various sectors including the economy, foreign relations and media. After the chaos and anarchy of the Cultural Revolution and strict and suffocative policies and control in the Mao period, the media in China saw a sense of freedom, both on managerial and financial levels. Also, the idea of self-sustaining media houses gave a kind of confidence in terms of financial dealings and content selections. Though the media in China had remained under the control of the party and state, as a result of reform policies it had witnessed a massive growth. This paper explains the growth and changes in the media sector after economic reform in China.

**Keywords:** China, media, economic reform

### Introduction

As soon as the chaos of the Cultural Revolution dwindled and the law and order situation began to normalise and the Gang of Four were arrested, the Chinese politics, economy and relations with the world started improving slowly. Due to new policies adopted by the PRC, the number of newspapers increased many folds and media houses got some financial autonomy in the post-Mao era. Mao died on September 9, 1976 and for the next few years his successor Hua Guofeng tried to rule the country on the same line on which it was during the Mao period. But soon Deng Xiaoping, who was purged during the Cultural Revolution resurfaced in the political arena of the PRC. Deng Xiaoping is the one who reshaped China that was suffering from several problems after the famine in 1959-61, in which more than 16 million people died (Meng, Qian & Yared: 2015: p: 1573)<sup>[14]</sup>, the failure of the Great Leap Forward and then the massive unrest of the Cultural Revolution. This journey of change, which is known as reform and openness, was a long journey that had many challenges and hurdles but finally, he succeeded to give a new look and identity to China. Following the new policies after reform and open up, media in China witnessed massive changes in terms of structure, reach and freedom. Due to the new policies, the number of newspapers and television stations increased many folds and there was lesser political control and censorship on media content.

This paper explains and elaborates media structure and function after the economic reform and openness in communist China. It also deals with various changes related to the financial and editorial policy of media in China. It also discusses structural changes in the media sector after economic reform.

### Ideological Basis of the Reform Process

Deng Xiaoping returned as leader of the country in July 1977 and a month later during the 11th Party Congress Deng was elected as the new Committee Vice Chairman and the Central Military Commission's Vice Chairman. Soon in early 1978, a new constitution was adopted, focusing more crucial economic planning and better law and order situation in the country (Cohen: 1979: p: 57)<sup>[6]</sup>. During the 11th National Congress, Deng came up with an idea which is known as the Four Modernizations. These are agriculture, industry, technology and military (Dernberger: 1980: p: 331)<sup>[7]</sup>. CCP also allowed and encouraged journalists, writers

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars have different estimates about total number of deaths in Famine of China during 1959-61. They have estimated from 15 million to 30 and 45 million. For detail please see: Dikotter, F. (2010). Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962. Walker, USA: Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

and artists to criticize party policies without attacking the top brass of the party.

Deng came up with the idea of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Bregolat: 2015: p: 12) <sup>[8]</sup>. He used the phrase to praise socialism for all developmental works which were carried out at that time but put the clause of Chinese characteristic to avoid the ideological complexities bypassing Marx and Lenin's view on the particular issue. Deng used this method to reform the responsibility system, reform of the economy and open up to the international community (Chan and Qiu: 2002: p: 29) <sup>[1]</sup>. He advocated for making China a modern, sustainable industrial nation. New legal frameworks in a number of sectors were also introduced (Lubman: 1999-2000: pp: 383-384) <sup>[17]</sup>.

### **The Economy of Newspaper Industry**

Following Deng Xiaoping's reform policies, China's mass media sector also witnessed massive changes and from the 1980s there was enormous growth reported in the media sector. Due to the new policies, the number of newspapers and television stations increased many folds and there was lesser political taboo on media content. Between 1985 and 1995 the number of daily newspapers doubled and the number of television stations increased more than four-fold (Chan & Qiu: 2002: p: 27) <sup>[1]</sup>. The government and the party not only loosened their control on content but in the early years of reform, they have given limited economic freedom which was not known in communist China. In the regime of Deng Xiaoping, Chinese media got 'economic autonomy' and became less dependent on the government and move to the market (Black: 2009: pp: 17-18).

The reform was not only limited to increasing the number of publications but also affected the economy of the media houses. In the Mao era, most of the media houses were financially dependent on the state and they were not considered profitable businesses but now the state couldn't take the financial burden of a large number of publications. Therefore, the government allowed the publishing of advertisements in newspapers which helped them to stand in the competitive market and in 1983 they were also allowed to have residual profits (Esarey: 2005: p: 41) <sup>[9]</sup>. In 1979, at the preliminary stage, only eight Beijing-based newspapers were allowed to have partly financial authority including People's Daily. In 1978, these eight newspapers led by the People's Daily requested the Ministry of Finance for more financial authority. Then, the ministry came up with the Measures for the Implementation of Entrepreneurial Fund at Newspapers in 1979 (Esarey: 2005: *ibid*) <sup>[9]</sup>.

The government came up with a solution of dividing financial responsibility between the centre and provinces. It decided that central level newspapers should be subsidised by the central government and provincial level newspapers by the concerned government but at the lower level the idea couldn't work and many chief editors of provincial-level newspapers complained at the National Conference of Chief Editors of Provincial Papers held in October 1986 that they have to manage the newspaper and also had to beg money for the survival of the paper (Chen & Lee: 1998: p: 583) <sup>[2]</sup>. Subsidies for media gradually reduced and in 1992, soon after Deng Xiaoping's Southern tour government introduced a policy in which various service industries including media were responsible for their profits and losses (Chen & Lee: 1998: *ibid*) <sup>[2]</sup>. As soon as the state forbid subsidies to media houses and they were allowed to develop themselves as a

profit-making business, they started competing with each other in various commercial activities including publishing advertisements. Zhou termed China's media commercialization as "a capitalistic body" that wears "a socialist face" (Lee: 2000, 14) <sup>[4]</sup>. According to him, due to commercialisation China's media has been transformed from "a strict mouthpiece of the government into what he calls the "Party Publicity Inc" (Lee: 2004: p: 120) <sup>[4]</sup>.

The outcome of the decentralisation of media was very significant. It not only made possible the massive expansion of media outlets but also made them financially viable through advertisements and other ways of revenue generation. High competition in the advertisements also forced media houses to make their content more interesting and informative for the readers (Esarey: 2005: p: 43) <sup>[9]</sup>. Before the economic reform, the government had a central detailed budget plan for newspapers and they spent government money on wages, newsprints and other things related to press and newsmen. The central government also allowed the lower level of party or state administrations to issue the license to the media houses and ended the old tradition of subsidies to media houses from the government. Now they can be involved in business and sell advertisements (Esarey: 2005: *ibid*) <sup>[9]</sup>. This led to a new dimension in the Chinese media. Competitive media houses tried to be different and through this, the content changed and corruption and scandals started making headlines. They started coming out with investigative reporting in various sectors including environmental corruption among the government functionaries (Esarey: 2005: *ibid*) <sup>[9]</sup>.

### **Investment in Media and Salary**

In the Mao era, and even till a few years after reform, the party used to appoint the main officials of a newspaper including editors and reporters but as soon as the marketization took place, the party put less focus on it and appointment of media personnel on the permanent basis has been abolished and performance-based contract system was introduced. This system also had incentives on the basis of standard reporting and performance (Stockmann: 2013: p: 58) <sup>[18]</sup>. But in practice, most of the people in media houses have a strong connection with the party. Top brasses of the party papers remain party cadres but they were started being paid as per media rule, not as their seniority in the party. Some newspapers also had negative incentives if the certain reports are not up to the mark and failed to fulfil the standard level or reporters came late to the editorial meetings<sup>2</sup> (Stockmann: 2013: p: 60) <sup>[18]</sup>.

In the 1990s media business was a growing one and the non-state business class also tried to invest in this sector. But initially, the government did not allow non-state investment. After 2000 it was allowed but only up to 49 percent. But despite this permission, all media houses remained state property and the central government transferred all such assets to the party in 2001 and all media houses became party-owned (Stockmann: 2013: pp: 62-63) <sup>[18]</sup>. Non-party papers were started. Due to decentralisation policies, the number of publications and broadcasting stations have been increased rapidly which posed a challenge to the regime and then they came up with the policy of recentralisation (Sukosd & Wang: 2013: p: 91) <sup>[19]</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> According to Stockmannit happened at Chongqing Business News where journalists had to pay fine if they came late in the meetings.

### Dual-Track System

Though media had been commercialized after reform and many regulations which were part of media control in the Mao era have been abolished after reform but both the government and people belong to the media sector know that media business is different from other businesses. It has the potential to generate revenue through advertisements but at the same time, it is very influential to propagate anything whether it is in favour or against the regime. It was the reason that even apart from liberalizing the economic sector Chinese authorities never gave up their ideological control. As Guo Ke pointed out, despite media organizations in China generating revenue after economic reform and soon most of them coming free from state subsidies, they were regarded as enterprises, they were not supervised by commerce and industry authorities. All of their functions and money trail were monitored by the Propaganda Department or its other agencies. They termed it a dual-track system in the Chinese newspaper industry. This system is also called the newspapers industry with the 'Chinese characteristics' (Ke: 2010: p: 51) <sup>[11]</sup>.

### Advertisement Industry

After the reform, China also legalised advertising. Media houses were allowed to publish advertisements which were one of the important bases of the commercialisation process. In the Mao period, advertising in newspapers was mostly limited only to the governmental announcement. The first advertisement was published and broadcast in 1979 (Sukosd & Wang: 2013: p: 92) <sup>[19]</sup>. And a few months later carrying advertisements were endorsed by the Central Propaganda Department under the Notice of the Publication and Broadcast of Advertisements of Foreign Products. Media were allowed to publish and telecast advertisements for both domestic and foreign goods. In 1988 print media was allowed to involve in various profit-making businesses including information services, commercial photography and training (Sukosd & Wang: 2013: *ibid*) <sup>[19]</sup>.

In the beginning, there were not many advertisements but soon it evolved as an industry and in 2006 Chinese advertisement industry was one of the largest in the world. The advertisement revenue was only 0.002 percent of the total GDP of China in 1979 which was about 10 million Yuan but it reached 174.1 billion Yuan by 2007 providing 1.1 million people (Cheng, 2010 Page 128) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Competition among national, regional and many local papers was seen as similar in the advertisement market. Evening papers and local mass appeal papers which had good market and reputation at their publishing place were giving competition to bigger party publications (Song & Chang: 2013: p: 622) <sup>[16]</sup>. To compete with the local and non-party papers, party papers in the mid-1990s came with a new strategy. At the provincial level, party papers started specific metropolitan newspapers based on the particular readership (Song & Chang: 2013: *ibid*) <sup>[16]</sup>. To get more financial benefit and for a wide range of news coverage, some regional newspapers also established a network of metropolitan newspapers. Through this network, they exchanged news of different areas and published more relevant stories with fewer expenses. This network was spread in most of the provinces of China (Song & Chang: 2013: p: 623) <sup>[16]</sup>.

### Xinhua News Agency

Xinhua is considered one of the largest news agencies in the

world. It is known as the eye and tongue of the party and state. Though during the Mao period also, it had foreign bureaus but since the Economic Reform, it has changed rapidly. In 2008, after 30 years of Reform, Xinhua was covering 190 countries through its 123 foreign bureaus and 23 bureaus within China. It was producing 300 news stories which were about four million words and 1500 photos per day (Hong: 2011: p: 378) <sup>[10]</sup>. The transformation of Xinhua took place in two stages. First, from 1978 to 1983 and then, from 1983 onwards. After the Reform, it was the aim of Xinhua to become a "proletarian world news agency". To achieve this goal, till 1982, 11 new foreign bureaus were established by Xinhua (Hong: 2011: p: 380) <sup>[10]</sup>. The dream to become the world's largest news agency was approved by the government in 1983. The Government accepted Xinhua's proposal to become a "modernized and socialist world news agency with Chinese characteristics" (Hong: 2011: *ibid*) <sup>[10]</sup>. From 1986, it had started releasing news round the clock from its headquarters in Beijing and also from overseas bureaus in different parts of the world. At the international level, Xinhua focused on both developed and developing countries. It came in competition while covering major International events and also started selling news to both domestic and international clients rather than free distribution (Hong: 2011: p: 381) <sup>[10]</sup>.

### The Number of Newspaper Titles and Circulation Increased

After the reform, the party has given permission to several organisations and bodies like professional societies and mass associations of party bodies to establish newspapers (Wu: 2000: p: 53) <sup>[20]</sup>. And only in seven years, there was massive growth in the number of newspapers. They increased from 180 in 1980 to 1661 in 1987. Television stations also increased rapidly. In 1983 there were only 52 television stations in the country which increased to 509 in 1990 (Sukosd & Wang: 2013: p: 93). The State Science and Technology Commission was in the process to develop an information economy in 1987 and it classified print and broadcasting houses as "information commodification industries" (Zhao: 2000: p: 6) <sup>[22]</sup>.

Due to the rise of market-oriented papers, circulation and number of papers related to most of the social groups such as business, consumer, lifestyle and mass appeal papers increased rapidly but on the other hand target papers of some social groups such as farmers, women, workers and youths decreased after the mid-1980s, both in terms of circulation and number of papers. From 1985 to 1994, the number of workers' papers decreased from 23 to 18 and farmers' papers decreased from 55 to 17 but the number of business papers increased from 100 to 237 during the same period (Zhao: 2000: p: 7) <sup>[22]</sup>. The reason behind this flip-flop could be government policies and consumer behaviour with market pressure. It was easy for business papers to generate revenue through advertisements and they can easily survive but also earn profit but at the same time for papers that were associated with farmers or workers, it was hard to have enough advertisements even only for survival.

### Changes in Editorial Policy

After the Third Plenum of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee at the end of 1978, the process of reform was accelerated. It included economic, political and also media (Nhan: 2008: p: 39) <sup>[15]</sup>. With an aim to accelerate media business and its

reach among the Chinese masses, the Propaganda Department organized a National News Work Meeting in March 1979. In his speech Hu Yaobang, the then director of the Propaganda Department, opined that media should be more original and proactive (Esarey: 2005: p: 40) <sup>[9]</sup>. He also favoured lifting restrictions on intellectual inquiry. To rebuild propaganda work and to strengthen the flow of information, he stressed publishing a newspaper by party committees at each level, from provinces to the local levels (Esarey: 2005: *ibid*) <sup>[9]</sup>. Yaobang deregulated media and encouraged it to be more proactive both in terms of content and the number of stories. He also encouraged establishing more media houses.

### Chinese Model of Media

Gong Xueping, a journalist and Shanghai Party Secretary came up with a new idea. He believed that in the field of media China should not follow either the Soviet-style or the western style but should place between both of them. He advocated that China should have its own model of media which he termed "socialist" mass media with "Chinese characteristics". This model should be a combination of both styles. From the Soviet-style, they copied editorial and content control and from the West, they took the design, management technique and knowledge to make media outlets financially self-sufficient. He said that this model can survive in the market as a profit-oriented business and also can fulfil the needs of the masses (Esarey: 2005: p: 54) <sup>[9]</sup>.

In the reform era, newspapers like People's Daily started opting for a more professional way to publish news and views. Unlike earlier, they started publishing articles short and sharp on current issues. The number of letters to the editor also increased in the People's Daily and it also started publishing errors and apologies (Chu: 1994: p: 7) <sup>[5]</sup>. Most of the media houses adopted professionalism in their reportage. Compared to mere ideological centric journalism, now readability, liveliness, truthfulness and timeliness became major attributes of newspaper materials. Crime, Human interest and disaster-related stories also started getting space in newspapers. The trend of corruption reporting of local officials have been increased (Zhao: 1998: p: 34) <sup>[21]</sup>. Chinese media which was leader-oriented during the Mao era is said that, after reform, it became reader-oriented (Zhao: 1998: *ibid*) <sup>[21]</sup>. After the reform, the People's Daily has more focused reporting and fewer politics compared to the Cultural Revolution period. It increased its pages from six to eight because it needed more pages to cover economic activities (Chu: 1994: p: 7) <sup>[5]</sup>. In the 1980s there were a number of metropolitan newspapers which are also known as city newspapers emerged. These newspapers are comparatively more focused on soft news which forced news agencies like Xinhua to develop content as per their requirement. Investigative journalism added more credibility to post-reform journalism.

### Starting of New Magazines and Promoting Enterprises in Media

As a natural fruit of the commercialisation of media, like any other industry media also tries to make its consumers happy. Financially the whole media industry which was surviving in a planned economy, due to reform, shifted to the market economy. Rapid urbanisation and a huge force of migrant workers solved the issue of readership. Migrant workers were educated and moved to cities in a hope of a

good job (Ke: 2010: p: 64) <sup>[11]</sup>. As explained, in many cities there were a number of new dailies started. After 1980, many magazines were also started. In the Mao period, China had also some magazines but most of them were published by various wings of the party but after reform, general interest magazines came up and became very popular in the semi-educated working class.

Most of these magazines usually published stories related to love affairs, fashion, beauty, family issues with other interest topics and compared to dry political and ideological magazines they were very much success in the market both in terms of circulation and advertisement revenue. In the 1980s, such types of magazines were very few and being sold at a very low price that's why they became a need of the people. Their contents usually consisted of short stories and sometimes were written only by the magazine's own staff and editors (Ke: 2010: *ibid*) <sup>[11]</sup>. Such magazines like *Stories*, *Zhi Yin* (Bosom Friend) and *Jia Ting* (Family) generated huge revenue through advertisements and circulation and came in the top 10 list of magazines in China (Ke: 2010: *ibid*) <sup>[11]</sup>.

Apart from lifestyle magazines, fashion magazines are very popular in China. Most of these magazines were being run by a joint venture with foreign companies. Compared to other magazines, fashion magazines are generating more advertisements. These magazines are financially self-sufficient and don't have government subsidies (Ke: 2010: p: 66-70) <sup>[11]</sup>. These magazines are usually the most profitable among other magazines. In 2005 alone, fashion magazines generated a revenue of 2.3 billion Yuan which was 40 percent of magazines belong to other categories (Cheng: 2010: p: 133) <sup>[3]</sup>.

### Changes in the Structure of Media

Ideally, mass media in China should follow the socialist ideology and no independent or private press should exist but in the post-Mao era, as explained, a number of such media houses were established. But, Chengju explains, that from the 1980s onward, the state has applied different regulation policies to different kinds of media organisations. The government was more conscious of its control on party papers and gave relaxations to non-party papers. Non-party papers were usually not required to carry out propaganda work and they were usually controlled by administrative departments rather than the party itself (Chengju: 2000: p: 650) <sup>[3]</sup>. Chinese media can be divided into three groups; official papers, semi-official and commercialized papers. Journalists and other people in the media industry usually define a paper based on its sponsor. Party papers are called official papers by editors and journalists (Stockmann: 2013: p: 68) <sup>[18]</sup>.

### Official Papers

Official papers are those which are run by the party and are mouthpieces of the party. Party sponsors such papers and, as explained, most of the people who work in such publications are party members. These publications take the state's position and their views are usually considered as party's view. Official papers are also called mother papers (Stockmann: 2013: p: 69) <sup>[18]</sup>. Ideally, party papers are those which are directly controlled by the party and their contents and editorial policies represent the concerned party committee and the governmental setup (Chengju: 2000: p: 650) <sup>[3]</sup>.

### Semi-official Papers

Semi-official papers are those which fall between both, party one and commercialized one. They work the same as official papers but their outlook is very similar to commercialized papers. Financially, they try to find out business for the revenue but are also given money from the government in the time of financial crisis. Most of the officials working in such papers come from the party only. These papers are also called son-papers (Stockmann: 2013: p: 68) <sup>[18]</sup>.

### Commercialised Papers

Commercialised newspapers are mostly reader-oriented. They conduct surveys and reach out to their readers and take their opinions about the paper. They hardly look towards the government for their financial needs. They treat readers as consumers and run like a business enterprise. Usually, commercial papers and semi-official papers are distinguished by the internal structure of the conglomerate system (Stockmann: 2013: *ibid*) <sup>[18]</sup>. Non-party media houses were usually supervised by the government departments, government or party organisations, research institutes, trade unions, or the main party paper in the concerned field.

### Conclusion

Chinese media witnessed rapid growth after the Reform, both in terms of the number of titles and their reach. During the Mao period, the media was mostly dependent on state subsidies which were allowed to have commercial activities. Advertisements in newspapers, magazines, radios and television channels increased in many folds. Various new experiments occurred both in media business and media content. Newspapers and magazines started competing with each other for providing better content and giving better options for advertisers. Xinhua, the premier news agency of China, registered massive growth and despite having a tag of propaganda tool of CCP, it is now being counted as one of the best news agencies in the world. Journalists got a better chance to report with some freedom and it was seen as a positive signal for the free press. The greatest reform in terms of media organisation can be summed up as the commercialisation of media outlets rather than dependence on the State.

The reform not only changed the economy of the media sector but afterward the media witnessed various changes both at organisational and structural levels. It started with the commercialisation of media under China's business management scheme. Media houses were allowed to engage in profit-making activities and advertisement and later, generating revenues were encouraged. The subsidies provided by the party were cut short and only a small number of national media organisations were left with the government subsidies in the early 1990s.

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