

Nothing but the Truth: News Media, Power and Hegemony in South China*

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The post-Mao reform era in China has seen the demise of utopianism. Where once the rhetoric of an unfolding socialist utopia worked to spur on the masses in their subjugation to a national cause, since the 1980s the rhetoric has entailed varying degrees of hedonism with the proliferation of consumerism, individualism, self-reliance and personal responsibility devolved to the individual or family.¹ This has produced Chinese worlds increasingly riven with anachronisms represented by the apparent contradictions of a “planned market” or “socialist market” economy.² The realm of media production in the 1990s has found itself caught in the middle of this sphere of social and rhetorical contention, engendering its own contradictions. Indeed the contradictions exhibited there may be more exaggerated than elsewhere; most notably in how Party control of the media has continued alongside increasing pressures on media organizations to compete for readerships, audiences and advertisers on an open market. Characteristic of this situation has been the emergence of new forms of media populism.³

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1. See e.g. Ci Jiwei, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); Elisabeth Croll, *From Heaven to Earth: Images and Experiences of Development in China* (London: Routledge, 1994); Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong, “Introduction: postmodernism and China,” *Boundary 2*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Fall 1997), pp. 1–18; Arif Dirlik, “Looking backward in the age of global capital: thoughts on history in Third World cultural criticism,” in Tang Xiaobing and Stephen Snyder (eds.), *In Pursuit of Contemporary East Asian Culture* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996); Xiaobing Tang, “New urban culture and the anxiety of everyday life in contemporary China,” in Tang and Snyder, *In Pursuit of Contemporary East Asian Culture*.

2. See e.g. Richard Smith, “The Chinese road to capitalism,” *New Left Review*, No. 199 (May–June 1993); Deborah S. Davis and Stevan Harrell (eds.), *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Deborah S. Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Deborah S. Davis and Ezra F. Vogel (eds.), *Chinese Society on the Eve of Tiananmen: The Impact of Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990)

3. See e.g. Zhao Yuezhi, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Li Zhurun, “Popular journalism with Chinese characteristics: from revolutionary modernity to popular modernity,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (December 1998), pp. 307–328; T. Wilson, “Truth and dare: Chinese weekend paper rakes scandal – and bucks,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 August 1997; Yu Huang, “Peaceful evolution: the case of television reform in post-Mao China,” *Media Culture & Society*, Vol. 16 (1994), pp. 217–241; Kevin Latham “Between markets and mandarins: journalism and the rhetorics of transition in South China,” forthcoming in Brian Moeran and Lise Skov (eds.), *Asian Media Productions* (Rickmansworth: Curzon Press); A. Hussain, *The Chinese Television Industry: The Interaction Between Government Policy and Market Forces* (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 1990).

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Newspapers, television and radio stations have become increasingly driven by economic imperatives rather than ideological ones since the mid-1980s, with even more dramatic commercialization following Deng Xiaoping's southern tour in 1992.⁴ Thus, the basic contradiction of media production is that the Party has consistently maintained the importance of the media as its promotional tool, prohibiting dissenting views, requiring support and explanation of Party policies and laying down strict codes of journalistic practice.⁵ At the same time, it has required more and more media organizations to be self-financing and subject to the vagaries of the market which necessitates innovative, attractive journalism. Similarly, the basic anachronism of media production is that its political imperative comes from the utopian model of the pre-reform era while its everyday editorial practice has to lean increasingly towards the hedonistic commercialism of market capitalism where media products, including journalism, are commodities no less than anything else. This article investigates how news media in Guangzhou have been embroiled in these contradictions, with its focus the notion of truth and its multiple manifestations in the city's mediated public domain.⁶ It considers the incompatible notions of truth which underpin Chinese and Western (including Hong Kong) news production. It argues that there are contending, overlapping and contradictory "regimes" of truth and social legitimation that relate to commercialization, the professional values of journalists, the perception of truth associated with freedom of the press, or lack of censorship, and the proliferation of external sources of news as China makes the transition from a planned to a socialist market economy. This then begs the question of where the truth, or truths, of Guangzhou news lies. It is argued that all these regimes of truth, authentication and legitimation discursively coexist in Guangzhou despite their incompatibilities. That is, people appeal to or refute such truths in different situations as they negotiate the mediated realities of their daily lives. The article concludes that despite the fragmentation of a monolithic representation of "the

4. Zhao Yuezhi, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China*, pp. 47–51.

5. See e.g. Li Xiaoping, "The Chinese television system and television news," *The China Quarterly*, No. 126 (June 1991), pp. 340–355.

6. This article is based upon extended fieldwork conducted in the summers of 1996, 1997 and 1999 and spring 1998 in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. I conducted research at the two main television stations in Guangzhou, one Guangzhou radio station, one city-level radio station in Guangdong, four newspapers in Guangzhou and three city-level newspapers in Guangdong. At all of these organizations I conducted formal and informal interviews with junior and senior journalists and editors; I worked as a television presenter of an English-language news documentary programme at one of the television stations and as a journalist at one of Guangzhou's top selling newspapers, also attending daily editorial meetings and shadowing duty editors in the daily production of the newspaper. In Hong Kong I conducted interviews at both of the main Hong Kong terrestrial television stations, at cable television news and with editors from leading newspapers and magazines. I have carried out extensive ethnographic audience research in different audience environments (domestic, public, family, working) both in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, including formal and informal audience interviews on television and radio reception and newspaper reading. I spent time teaching and researching at the Department of Journalism at Jinan University, Guangzhou and talking to scholars at the Department of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

truth,” the Communist Party continues to maintain its hegemony through the circulation of empty rhetorical signifiers such as the fear of chaos. Yet understanding news media practices reveals ways in which the Party’s hegemony may be becoming increasingly fragile.

Guangzhou and the Zhu [Pearl] River Delta have been at the forefront of economic reform since its outset.⁷ Hence, as elsewhere in China, throughout the 1980s and 1990s media production in the region has burgeoned. Yet the development of media production in and around Guangzhou requires attention to the specific local context. Most notably, it cannot be understood in isolation from the influences of its dominant neighbour, Hong Kong. For instance, in 1986 Pearl River Economic Radio was founded by Guangdong People’s Radio as a direct attempt to win back audiences from Hong Kong radio stations with a format emphasizing light entertainment, information of immediate local concern and economic issues.⁸ Throughout the 1980s television producers increasingly faced the same kind of cross-border competition and, though strictly speaking illegal, by the end of the decade Hong Kong television viewing was widespread in the region. With the proliferation of cable television in the mid-1990s, Hong Kong television has become officially available to the populations of Guangzhou and other cities in the region, though with regular clumsy censorship particularly of news broadcasts. The popularity of Hong Kong television with viewers is also reflected in the regional perception among television practitioners of Hong Kong television as their main rival rather than Central Television or any of their local counterparts.⁹

In this way, the media landscape of Guangzhou and the Zhu River Delta is unique. It is historically, politically and culturally situated in post-Mao China with the conflicting ideological and practical pulls and tensions that that entails. At the same time, it is situated in the immediate proximity of Hong Kong’s commercial media with its broadly Euro-American mix of capitalism and an ethos of public service broadcasting. The region’s media producers and audiences share inescapable experiences of the rapid transformations that China has undergone in recent decades, while the persistence of Maoist principles of media production cannot be ignored. In this way the media situation in the Zhu River Delta region is quite different from that in Europe or the United States. At the same time, because of the semi-permeable media boundary with Hong

7. Ezra F. Vogel, *One Step Ahead in China: Guangdong under Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,

8. Zhao Yuezhi, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China*, pp. 95–100. Other radio stations in Guangdong and China more generally have emulated this highly successful move.

9. See e.g. Xie Wangxin, “Zai hezuo zhong qiu gaige qiu fazhan qiu tigao” (“Seeking reform, development and improvement amidst co-operation”), *South China Television Journal*, No. 3 (1997), pp. 11–16 at p. 13; Qu Zuojie, “Xianggang dianshi jiejian shuo” (“On drawing lessons from Hong Kong television”), *South China Television Journal*, No. 2 (1997), pp. 76–77; Xing Fuzhong, “Xianggang dianshi yi pie” (“A glance at Hong Kong television”), *South China Television Journal*, No. 2 (1997), pp. 78–79; Huang Kuangyu, “Dui Xianggang dianshi xinwen de wenhua fenxi” (“A cultural analysis of Hong Kong television news”), *South China Television Journal*, No. 5 (1998), pp. 34–37. All translations from Chinese texts in this article are my own.

Kong, media practices have to be considered in relation to a semi-transnational frame of reference quite specific to the region within China.

People in Guangzhou and the Zhu River Delta live increasingly in mediated worlds. Radio has long since been taken for granted and television – terrestrial and cable (including satellite channel relays) – is ubiquitous with urban residents commonly receiving 30 or more channels in their homes. News stands typically offer dozens of daily and weekly newspapers in addition to a plethora of magazines and books. Video cassettes retail at affordable prices, if largely because of pirating, while Internet service providers have sprung up throughout the city. Guangzhou residents commonly invest and speculate on the stock market and have come to demand ever more news and information to facilitate this.¹⁰ Similarly, businesses in the region typically have international links to Hong Kong and overseas and it is commonplace for families to have friends or relatives in Hong Kong, Macau, Europe, Australia or the United States. All these aspects of people's lives create the desire for local, national and international news and information. Hence the realities of everyday life for many people in Guangzhou and the surrounding area are increasingly intertwined with forms of media representation.

It is now commonplace for critical media studies theorists to assume that news relies upon the hidden creation of its own regimes of self-legitimizing truth.¹¹ That is, the truth of news is not external to it and dependent upon the accuracy of its representation, but rather is:

The end product (hopefully) of a mixture of fact, fiction, fabrication and faking whose chief characteristic is that the audience – with much encouragement – continues to believe in it despite the odds. Indeed, the principal requirement for the preservation and communication of truth is that no one, outside television, realizes that it is founded, literally, on an “as if” premise.¹²

News works “as if” it refers, truthfully, to an external reality, whereas in effect any such reality is rather a product of the specific conditions, methods, systems and governing assumptions of news production, that is of its “regime of truth.”¹³ This understanding of news and truth, however,

10. This observation is based on reader interviews conducted between 1996 and 1999. Guangzhou has two daily economic newspapers and all of the top five daily newspapers carry stock market information daily. Guangzhou's most recent daily newspaper, *New Express*, has partly focused its marketing strategy around the provision of practical, readable economic news (interviews with editors, 1997–99). Both local and national television stations give prominence to economic and business news. It is also common for pagers and mobile phones to provide stock market information as well as telecommunications services.

11. See e.g. Stuart Hall *et al.*, “The social production of news,” in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978); John Hartley, *Tele-ology: Studies in Television* (London: Routledge, 1992); John Hartley, *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture* (London: Arnold, 1996); John Eldridge (ed.), *Getting the Message: News, Truth and Power* (London: Routledge, 1993); John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987); Roger Fowler, *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the British Press*. (London: Routledge, 1991).

12. Hartley, *Tele-ology*, p. 47.

13. E.g. for Foucault: “‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. ‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects

can only be a starting point for dealing with the situation in Guangzhou where truth is a far more complicated affair. For one thing, there are at least two quite distinct and incompatible “regimes of truth,” those of Hong Kong and China, which underpin the production of the news which people in Guangzhou engage with.

Furthermore, if one agrees with Hartley in accepting that the authenticity of a piece of journalism “comes in the end from the viewer’s belief in it, a belief sustained not as an individual opinion but via a literacy in the social ideology of realism,”¹⁴ then it is clear that one must consider what such a literacy entails. This article outlines some of the kinds of “literacies of realism” that pertain to news in Guangzhou. Certainly, it is far from straightforward in the Chinese case to assume that the audience continues to believe in the truth of news media, of whatever source, “despite the odds.” Indeed, the odds in China would appear to have been reversed. That said, the notion of “truth” is still of fundamental importance to any understanding of news and mediated realities in Guangzhou. Not only is truth, with the associated appeal to facts and reality, a core assumption of both regimes of news production but it is also one of the key criteria by which people in Guangzhou judge them.

Regimes of truth are inextricable from the productive circulation of power in society.¹⁵ Thus, the truths of mediated realities in Guangzhou have to be considered against a political backdrop of power. It is important to note that such a plethora of alternative truths, to be found in relation to news media alone, does not point to a chaotic diffusion of power and weakened government authority. Indeed, as argued in the final section, that chaos, or more precisely the fear of it, comes to feature quite differently in this Chinese context as one of the rhetorical tools by which a sometimes fragile hegemony perpetuates itself.

Principles of News Production

All news media in China are considered to be the “mouthpiece” of the Party.¹⁶ This has been explicitly formulated in speeches by Party leaders over the decades. It is also generally understood among the population and openly acknowledged by journalists.¹⁷ In this sense the media

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of power which it induces and which extend it.” From Michel Foucault, “Truth and power,” in *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980) at p. 133; See also Hartley, *Tele-ology*, p. 46, for discussion of “regimes of truth” in television news production.

14. Hartley, *Tele-ology*, p. 204.

15. Foucault, “Truth and power,” p. 131.

16. See e.g. Li Xiaoping, “The Chinese television system and television news,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 126 (June 1991), pp. 340–355; Zhao Yuezhi, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China*; Yu Jinglu, “The structure and function of Chinese television, 1979–1989,” in Chin-chuan Lee (ed.), *Voices of China: The Interplay of Politics and Journalism* (New York: Guilford Press); W.H. Chang, *Mass Media in China: the History and the Future* (Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1989); R.L. Bishop, *Qi Lai! Mobilizing One Billion Chinese: The Chinese Communication System* (Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1989).

17. In interviews with audiences, readers and journalists in Guangzhou it was usually one of the first things that interviewees pointed out to me and no one ever refuted it. In the large

throughout the pre-reform era had a vital part to play in the promotion of political campaigns and government policy. Charles Cell, writing in the early 1980s on mass campaigns principally in the pre-reform era, emphasized the importance of communication techniques:

A wide range of written materials is used to promote campaigns, with newspaper articles and editorials among the most common ... Of equal if not more importance as a means of communication are radio broadcasts ... However, the newspapers probably penetrate more deeply into the consciousness of the population.¹⁸

In the 1990s, the importance of radio has clearly diminished in relation to television which was still relatively undeveloped in China at the time Cell was writing.¹⁹ Yet, though technological developments have changed the face of the media landscape in China since the 1970s and early 1980s, the guiding principles of news production, as promoted by the Communist Party, have changed little. As Li has put it principally in relation to television: "The main task ... is to help the Party and the government to build a socialist society."²⁰ Hence, one of the fundamental responsibilities of news media is to contribute to social change as desired by Party and government. This role emerges in the theoretical formulation of news production. It is effectively reproduced in the conceptualization of truth upon which Chinese news production is founded.

The principles of socialist news which, in theory at least, underpin news production in the People's Republic of China can be summarized by Zhou Enlai's ten-character summary: "Be loyal to facts, be

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majority of cases interviewees saw it necessary to make this point when explaining Chinese news and media to this foreign researcher.

18. Charles P. Cell, "Communication in China's mass mobilization campaigns," in Godwin C. Chu and Francis Hsu (eds.), *China's New Social Fabric* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1983), p. 27. See also e.g. G. Bennet, "China's mass campaigns and social control," in A.A. Wilson, S.L. Greenblatt and R. Wilson (eds.), *Deviance and Control in Chinese Society* (New York: Praeger, 1977); S.L. Greenblatt, "Campaigns and the manufacture of deviance," in Wilson *et al.*, *Deviance and Control in Chinese Society*; G. Bennet, *Yundong: Mass Campaigns in Chinese Communist Leadership* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

19. See James Lull, *China Turned On: Television, Reform and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 1991) and Zhang Ximing, "Dianshiye: kong zhong jingzheng riqi jilie" ("The television industry: competition in the air gets daily more fierce"), in Weng Jieming, Zhang Ximing, Zhang Sui and Qu Kemin (eds.), *1996-1997 nian Zhongguo fazhan zhuangkuang yu qushi (The Situation and Direction of China's Development, 1996-1997)* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1996) for details of the current state of development of television in China. Zhao suggests that "the proposals of Chinese scholars have been heavily biased toward print journalism, primarily because many leading scholars were press scholars to begin with and because the press has been at the center of both Party journalism and journalism theory in China. But such a bias is no longer justified. Given that television has become the most important medium ... television should be at the center of reconstruction of the media system" (Zhao Yuezhi, *Media, Market and Democracy in China*, p. 193). It is nevertheless important to note that radio has taken on a new significance in the Chinese media landscape. Although it is secondary to television, with the emergence of populist radio programming such as that of *Pearl River Economic Radio* (see above) and the proliferation of live call-in shows in recent years, it has made something of a resurgence and its role in the complex media mix of the reform period is not to be underestimated. The arguments presented in this article regarding contending truths and hegemony apply equally to radio as to television or print media.

20. Li Xiaoping, "The Chinese television system and television news," p. 347.

loyal to true principles.”²¹ This imperative can be reduced to two (English) words: truth and objectivity. However, it is important to realize that the socialist notions of truth and objectivity applied in China are fundamentally different from those in Western, “capitalist” news production.²²

The abiding principle of Chinese news, promulgated by Mao but still current in the 1990s, was that of objectivity understood in terms of the four-character phrase “Seek truth from facts” (*shishi qiushi*). By facts, the adage refers to the accurately reported real affairs in the world: “That affairs are true to objective reality and data are reliable and irrefutable are the most basic starting characteristics of news.”²³ The literature on Chinese news theory is replete with expositions of the basic requirements of news reporting including the need for it to accord with objective reality.²⁴ First of all, facts must be real.²⁵ That is, Chinese news production is founded upon the assumption of an objective, real, material world which can and must be accurately reported.

Socialist news, however, requires more than simply accurate reporting facts. It calls for “seeking the truth” of the those facts:

The socialist news profession has even higher demands of the reality of news. It does not only demand that every situation, every fact ... reflects objectivity in a manner that is accurate to reality, but it also demands that in relation to the totality of facts, it must provide for people objective realistic views, to be helpful to people to penetrate these views of objective life and recognize the basic nature of society and its era.²⁶

The key point in understanding the notion of “truth” entailed in “seek truth from facts” is the last one. The reporting of facts is to be seen in the broader context of enabling people to “recognize the basic nature of society and its era,” that is, the basic nature according to Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. Although class struggle has been downplayed in many areas of Chinese policy-making and implementation since 1978, even in the 1990s this understanding of news is also commonly phrased in journalism textbooks in terms of the class basis of news. Hence capitalist (class) news is contrasted with proletarian (class) news.²⁷

21. M. Cheng and B. Tong, *Xinwen lilun jiaocheng* (*A Course in News Theory*) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 1993), p. 178.

22. Zheng Baowei, *Xinwenxue daolun* (*A Guide to the Study of News*) (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1990), p. 33.

23. Cheng and Tong, *A Course in News Theory*, p. 172.

24. See e.g. *ibid.*; Zheng Baowei, *A Guide to the Study of News*, pp. 32–55; Zhou Hongshu, *Xinwen lilunxue lunwang* (*An Outline of the Study of News Theory*) (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1995) pp. 130–140. The Chinese term *keguan* is usually glossed as objective being literally the view of a “guest/outsider” as opposed to subjective, *zhuguan*, “the view of a host/insider.” Implicit in these terms is the differentiation of viewpoints. It would be of interest to pursue the implications of these terms further.

25. Cheng and Tong, *A Course in News Theory* pp. 172–78; Zheng Baowei, *A Guide to the Study of News*, pp. 32–33.

26. Cheng and Tong, *A Course in News Theory*, p. 172.

27. See e.g. Zheng Baowei, *A Guide to the Study of News*, pp. 33–39; Zhou Hongshu, *An Outline of the Study of News Theory*, pp. 130–34.

In this way, the “basic nature of society” refers to the Chinese communist formulation of its class structure.

Yet this notion of objectivity not only refers to the reporting of “objective reality” but also entails the crucial notion of a broader “truth” which is fundamental to an understanding of the principles of Chinese news production. Cheng and Tong explain:

An isolated fact looked at on its own may be in agreement with objective reality, but if it is placed in the middle of the system of reality, if it is compared to other facts and compared with the totality of facts, it is also biased and not in agreement with the whole of objective reality. Some people summarize this kind of situation as micro-reality and macro-reality, individual reality and total reality, the expressions may be different but the meaning is the same. Facts in news reporting and the totality of these kinds of facts must be unified. In Lenin’s words, then, it is to say that facts must be grasped from the mutual inter-relations of the totality of all the facts.²⁸

So, the “truth” which is to be sought from facts, is the true state of society and the objective world as formulated by Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. It is a class-based view of society which legitimizes the “proletarian” (*wuchanjieji*) viewpoint above all others. In the words of Liu Shaoqi, this produces the apparently contradictory imperative for news to be “objective, true, fair, holistic and at the same time have a standpoint.”²⁹ The core principles of this endeavour to uncover the basic nature of social reality so that the goal of the socialist transformation of the country may be more efficiently achieved are adherence to truth, facts and objectivity.

These are of course also the explicit principles of news reporting in other parts of the world, including Europe, America and Australasia (which are here glossed as “Western” news for simplicity). The Australian Journalist’s Association Code of Ethics, for instance, states that:

Respect for the truth and the public’s right to information are overriding principles for all journalists. In pursuance of these principles journalists commit themselves to ethical and professional standards ... They shall report and interpret the news with scrupulous honesty by striving to disclose all essential facts and by not suppressing relevant, available facts or distorting by wrong or improper emphasis.³⁰

Such a notion also broadly informs and forms the basic principles of Hong Kong news media.³¹ In both China and the West, including Hong Kong, there is thus the assumption that there are facts in the real world and news reporting must be based upon them. An important distinction, however, can be seen to be in understanding the way that truth is based upon these facts. The point is made in the quotation above by the

28. Cheng and Tong, *A Course in News Theory*, p. 178.

29. From a speech in May 1956, quoted in Zhou Hongshu, *An Outline of the Study of News Theory*, pp. 131–32.

30. Quoted in Hartley, *Tele-ology*, p. 46.

31. In interviews with television news producers in Hong Kong in 1996 and 1997 and print journalists and editors in 1997 and 1998, interviewees stressed the balanced and uncensored principles of Hong Kong news production, usually explicitly linking Hong Kong news to European and American practices. See also below.

imperative not to “suppress relevant, available facts or distort by wrong or improper emphasis.”

In the 1990s the distinction between these two formulations of news production was evident to journalists in Hong Kong and Guangzhou who were clearly familiar with both. Television and print journalists and editors in Hong Kong often outlined the basis of objectivity in Hong Kong news reporting.³² First, they would explain that there were basic facts of a story which were true and the journalist must report these accurately. Secondly came the imperative for the balanced representation of these facts in news stories. If one gave one side of an argument one must always also give the other. Impartiality was crucial for journalists in Hong Kong. In China, by contrast, it was important to give the “whole picture,” meaning that stories were to have an educative function telling people not just what happened but why, how, what to make of it and so on.

The editor of a major business paper in Guangzhou explained the notion of objectivity in Hong Kong news in a similar way.³³ For him, Hong Kong news was objective in the sense that it had grasped the notion of objective “form” well, where by “form” he meant the imperative to report both or different sides of a story or issue.³⁴ By contrast, he explained, Chinese news did not work with this notion of objective form. Rather it relied upon the combination of the notion of accurately reporting facts and the notion of objectivity involving not simply facts being in themselves true but true in the broader sense of “seeking truth from facts.” Facts, he said, in a formulation broadly similar to Cheng and Tong’s above, may be true in themselves but they do not constitute the whole truth which must be sought in the totality of facts.

In principle, then, the objectivity in the reporting of news which people in Guangzhou receive daily involves at least three notions of objectivity. The first is the reporting of facts – things that happened – which is broadly shared by Hong Kong and Chinese media. Second is the notion of seeking truth from facts, specific to Chinese news media, in which there is ultimately only one socialist truth which is valid. Finally, there is the notion of objectivity found also in Western media as an

32. Interviews with author, 1996–99. The need for news reporting to be “objective” and “truthful” was always one of the principal points made to me in interviews with journalists. However, it is also important to note that many saw increasing, tough competition between Hong Kong newspapers starting to stretch the application of these principles. Television journalists felt a greater duty to control sensationalist reporting. Television news reporters were also often scathing about the lax journalistic principles of peak time “infotainment” programmes which had become very popular in recent years. They often referred to these jokingly as *bagua xinwen* (“eight trigrams” news), suggesting they were speculative and unscientific. This term was also used for the increasingly “tabloid” nature of some Hong Kong newspaper reporting.

33. I held a series of interviews with this editor in July and August 1997, each lasting between three and four hours and conducted in private away from his place of work. Although he found the topic of objectivity particularly interesting, I give this as just one example which is representative of comments made by many journalists interviewed.

34. He nevertheless had reservations about the quality of Hong Kong reporting in general which he thought less rigorous than reporting in Guangzhou.

imperative to impartial reporting by the inclusion of multiple perspectives.³⁵

Multiple Truths

Chinese journalism theorist Zhou Hongshu, like John Hartley, has made the connection between objectivity and believability:

The crucial factor in how news can win over tens of thousands of readers and audiences, how it can be welcomed by them, received by them and become the leading force whereby they are encouraged to recognize and reform the objective world is in its truthfulness and its believability in the hearts of the people.³⁶

Yet consideration of this issue is noticeably absent from Chinese news theory literature. The rhetorical assumption is that if news is faithful to facts, it will be seen to be true and therefore believed by its readerships and audiences. No concern is voiced for how the historically and socially situated conditions of news reception, including people's experiences of 50 years of mass campaigns and propaganda or their more recent exposure to external sources of news, may also affect the believability of Chinese news media.³⁷

There is, however, a significant disjuncture between the theoretical literature and the everyday worlds of journalists and their audiences.³⁸ Journalists in Guangzhou have faced rival news production from Hong Kong for two decades and they are as aware as anyone else in China of the reservations, frustrations, boredom and scepticism that the general populace is capable of, faced with dry, predictable propagandist media. In this vein, a recent article in the *Yang Cheng Evening News*, the most popular local daily newspaper in Guangzhou, revealed a certain irony with regard to people's attitudes to the media.³⁹ During the Third Guangzhou Clean-up Campaign in the summer of 1997, the paper reported how many citizens had not got into the spirit of the campaign. Journalists had found that although Party workers dutifully put in hours

35. What I have been discussing here are, of course, the ideological principles of news reporting, Western and Chinese. News producers that I spoke to were fully aware of the differences between these principles and their own practices of news production and often spoke of such principles with detached reflexivity rather than epistemological commitment. Indeed, news production involved complex articulations of divergent and contradictory practices in the same way that I suggest viewing and reading did. This is something I have discussed elsewhere (Latham "Between markets and mandarins").

36. Zheng Baowei, *A Guide to the Study of News*, p. 33.

37. Professional journals are another matter. In these the practical problems of maintaining audience interest are openly discussed. See e.g. Xie Wangxin, "Seeking reform, development and improvement amidst co-operation"; Fang Kang, "21 shiji dianshi fazhan zhanlüe – guanyu Guangdong dianshi fazhan zhanlüe de sikao" ("A strategy for the development of television in the 21st century – thoughts on the development strategy of Guangdong television"), *South China Television Journal*, No. 1 (1997), pp. 4–12.

38. I use the term audiences to include readerships as well as television and radio audiences.

39. "People watch street sweeping with cool detachment. People face slovenliness with indifference. On the Spot News of the Third Guangzhou Clean-up Campaign," *Yang Cheng Evening News*, 16 August 1997, A2.

of public street-cleaning in their spare time, the bulk of the populace nevertheless looked on, “hands in sleeves.” Shopkeepers even closed for the day when they knew an inspection was to take place as they knew business would be poor. Some untouched citizens even threw rubbish into the street while local government cadres were sweeping up. The situation was neatly summarized by a cadre of the Fang Cun District Environmental Hygiene Bureau: “The government has invested so many human and material resources organizing this clean-up campaign that it shows their determination and sincerity towards it, but if citizens don’t actually get themselves mobilized, can this mammoth campaign ever be successful?”⁴⁰

This article reported a common lethargy exhibited by Guangzhou residents towards Party mass mobilization campaigns. However, many people in Guangzhou exhibit a similar lethargy towards Party news in the media, of which this is a clear example. Bearing in mind the important part that media have been given to play in mass campaigns (see above), the article exhibits a complex irony. People stand by as Party officials labour in the heat, apparently indifferent to the campaign and those working for it. Yet their indifference to the campaign, also indicates their indifference to the media reports which are an integral part of the campaign itself. The article in effect reports its own lack of readership. It acknowledges and reports the unravelling of its own conditions of existence as the epistemological frames of news production form an existential link between the campaign and the press. Either one is an integral part of the other. To stand by and indifferently watch the participants of the campaign is analogous of certain attitudes to the disseminating machine of which news production in China is a fundamental part.

With this in mind, it is clearly important to consider the other regimes of truth which characterize Guangzhou’s mediatized public domain. This article concentrates on three broad supplementary areas of legitimation and social authentication. First are the important ways in which journalists implement quite different criteria from those of socialist “truth” in their daily production of news. These cover a range of issues from notions of professional pride to “paid journalism.” Secondly, burgeoning alternative sources of news and information, alongside sometimes clumsy methods of media censorship, affirm for audiences the existence of alternative truths to those in the domestic media. Thirdly, the contradictions associated with the move from utopianism to hedonism, characteristic of the reform period, constantly highlight the anachronistic nature of the basic assumptions of Chinese Party media production at a time when the broad rhetorics of social truth have been dramatically reformulated.

In the reform period since 1978 Chinese media have been increasingly exposed to the vagaries of the commercial competitive market for

40. *Ibid.*

audiences and advertisers.⁴¹ With the proliferation of newspapers and radio and television stations in the 1980s, the government was unable to maintain the level of subsidy whereby it had sustained media production up until that time.⁴² Increasing media independence in the form of the relaxation of control mechanisms meant that movements towards political media reform tended to overshadow the growing tide of commercialism. After 1989, however, and particularly after Deng's southern tour in 1992, the thrust of media reform was more and more commercial. With political control of the media as forceful as ever, newspapers, television and radio stations all found different ways of attracting audiences while working within the political confines entailed by the notion of Party media.⁴³

Significantly, the rise of commercial pressures on journalists and media organizations has seen the development of extensive "paid journalism" as well as milder forms of sponsorship and commercial influence in editorial decision-making.⁴⁴ This means that journalists are no longer simply working according to criteria of objectivity and truth. Certainly in cases of sponsorship and paid journalism the standpoint taken is that of increasingly powerful commercial corporations with concerns of their own. With such practices blatantly manifested in daily newspapers and other media production, quite different criteria of "believability" clearly come into play.

At the same time, many journalists have a strong sense of professionalism which once again formulates truth and objectivity in contradistinction to either the Party line or these new forms of news "corruption." Journalists in Guangzhou would openly acknowledge these practices of commercialization just as they would readily acknowledge the anachronistic nature of the Party-mouthpiece principle. Yet many would also deplore practices of paid journalism and be sceptical of Party control of media production. Paid journalism, they commonly agreed, was professionally unethical. Indeed, mention of it brought out a strong defence of journalistic objectivity, with objectivity, in this case, referring to the importance of reporting independent of commercial interests. The subordination of media to the Party was on the whole viewed with less suspicion and less condemnation, but it was seen by many, especially younger journalists or senior editors under strong pressure from market competition, as both a commercial inconvenience and an unwelcome fetter on journalistic freedom.⁴⁵

41. Zhao Yuezhi, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China*; Latham "Between markets and mandarins"; Li Zhurun, "Popular journalism with Chinese characteristics."

42. Zhao Yuezhi, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China*, p. 53.

43. *Ibid.* esp. pp. 127–150

44. *Ibid.* esp. pp. 52–93.

45. Commercially inconvenient were the obligations to report Party and news which journalists commonly perceived to be considered dull by audiences. For instance chief editors of radio stations, television news and newspapers noted the problem of reporting Party and government meetings. They were obliged to do this but knew that audiences on the whole had little interest in such stories. Those who saw Party control as an unwelcome fetter would refer to the constraints entailed upon journalistic style, content and freedom to practise

The issue of fettered journalistic freedom is also relevant to the second area of interest mentioned above: external sources of news and information. There are different assumptions about objectivity involved in the production of news in Hong Kong as opposed to China, but there is also another aspect of this juxtaposition to consider. That is how members of news audiences in Guangzhou perceived the differences between the two kinds of news. The practice of blatantly censoring Hong Kong television received via cable in Guangzhou, especially news, signals a different attitude towards freedom of information within and outside China. Here is another sense of objectivity which is negatively defined in relation to Chinese news. News which is censored is by definition incomplete, hence objectivity becomes the abstract notion of the whole before anything was cut out. Objectivity becomes what censored news cannot be by definition. That is the censorship itself draws attention to and highlights to many viewers the restriction on information that pervades other domestic news sources.

Yet the issue of objectivity, in this regard, is not one of credibility. Viewers in Guangzhou often had reservations with regard to both sources of news. Hong Kong news was often considered too commercial and biased towards local interests, while people in Guangzhou often simultaneously showed a degree of propaganda fatigue with domestic news production.⁴⁶ For example, when asked whether they thought Chinese news was truthful or not interviewees would commonly point out that it was undoubtedly truthful. What concerned them, though, was not so much what the news told them as what it did not. Such an explanation is indicative of many people's awareness of what is more theoretically discussed as "objectivity" and also of the ways in which many people in Guangzhou were very competent media analysts. It is also significant, however, that the notion of objectivity employed here was clearly different from the principles of mainland news objectivity discussed above. Yet these comments highlighted a criterion of objectivity which has become ever more evident to people as external sources of news and information proliferate.

This is not simply a matter of Hong Kong television news. Indeed, most viewers of Hong Kong television in Guangzhou are more interested in it as a medium of entertainment than as an essential source of news. However, in recent years other external sources of information have proliferated. The development of telecommunications, including international mobile phones and faxes, has increasingly linked people in

footnote continued

investigatively. Several senior editors of newspapers complained that Party restrictions restricted the kinds of news they could report and where stories could be placed in newspapers. They also pointed out the negative commercial implications of such restrictions.

46. However, survey data from the early 1990s suggested that the Guangzhou populace in fact rated mainland Chinese news production slightly above Hong Kong news production in terms of credibility (source Joseph M. Chan, Chinese University of Hong Kong, personal communication, 1996).

Guangzhou to the Chinese diaspora.⁴⁷ At the same time the Internet and email are becoming increasingly available to intellectuals and professionals at work and, now, also to the rapidly growing body of domestic computer users in Guangzhou. The possibilities for international travel have also increased enormously in recent years with opportunities for overseas holidays, study and visiting relatives no longer being seen as exceptional but as commonplace for those with the financial resources. Such opportunities clearly expose people to numerous alternative sources of news and information independent of the party-state.

In this way, the official position on news media which emphasizes its role as mouthpiece of the Party looks increasingly anachronistic on a daily basis to people in Guangzhou. Party cadres are undoubtedly aware of this and the state media have to some degree turned to glossier, more subtle forms of presentation for their ideological and pedagogical messages.⁴⁸ However, any attempts to make the mouthpiece speak more gently or more excitingly are perpetually undermined, in Guangzhou at least, by the clumsy and transparent practices of Hong Kong television censorship.

What people are dealing with in such cases is the juxtaposition of contradictory alternative frames of reference. That is, news produced according to incompatible principles of truth and objectivity and the growing seepage of news and information from sources external to the Party domain. This seepage is crucial, for it demarcates the limits of the Party-mouthpiece model of news objectivity. This is also related to the third area of concern in this section regarding the shifting rhetorics of the reform period. The Party model of news production is a dinosaur of the Maoist era and inextricable from the Maoist rhetoric of utopianism. This highly modernist socialist revolutionary project was founded upon the hermetic notions of the nation-form and the development of a national market and culture.⁴⁹ News production and the role of media more generally was always, as shown above, subservient to this utopian vision constituting and presupposing the world's largest "imagined community."⁵⁰ The news seepage from outside sources, therefore, importantly marks the rupture of this hermetic imagining.

However, this imagining has also been increasingly disturbed over the last two decades by the Party's own shifting rhetorics of sociality, from utopianism to hedonism.⁵¹ As the reform period has aged, a Party-driven mass culture based on the "content over the form, use value over exchange value and participatory communal action over heterogeneous

47. Scholars have often noted how important such alternative sources of information and channels of communication were during the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 (see e.g. Zhao Yuezhi, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China*, p. 174).

48. Geremie Barmé, "CCP™ & ADCULT PRC," *The China Journal*, No. 41 (January 1999), pp. 1–23; Li Zhurun, "Popular journalism with Chinese characteristics."

49. Dirlik and Zhang, "Introduction: postmodernism and China," p. 3.

50. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

51. Ci Jiwei, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*; Croll, *From Heaven to Earth*; Xiaobing Tang "New urban culture and the anxiety of everyday life in contemporary China."

everyday life” has been inlaid with a contradictory affirmation of everyday life, the valorization of consumption and consumerism and a new rhetoric of self-sufficiency and individual responsibility.⁵² As Ann Anagnost has put it, the emergence of a new multiplicity of identities contests and disturbs the maintenance of a monolithic official order: “Indeed, the new kinds of subjectivities made possible by the economic reforms have led to new problems for the party-state in representing itself as a unified agent that exerts a palpable force in society.”⁵³

The notions of truth and objectivity associated with the Party-mouthpiece model of news production cannot avoid a similar subversion because of their inextricable relation to the Maoist project. Viewers and readers of news in Guangzhou, and in this case certainly also elsewhere in China, have been confronted on a daily basis with the basic contradictions of Party rhetorics and practices. Hence, the adherence to an absolute notion of Party media control coexists alongside rhetorical valorizations of individuality, consumerism, self-reliance and responsibility, and in conjunction with the manifest intrusion of non-Party, principally commercial, influences on media production. At the same time there is an ever broadening spectrum of alternative news sources in Guangzhou. This all contributes to the destabilization of news objectivity based upon a postulated Party “truth” or prioritized class position. The “regime of truth” that once linked together and drew its legitimation from largely unquestioned rhetorics of Maoist utopianism and everyday practices of social being now exists alongside contending regimes of truth, legitimation and authentication.

Truth, Power, Hegemony

Truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power ... truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.⁵⁴

In Guangzhou in the 1990s it is clear that there are numerous contending and competing “regimes of truth.” It is also clear that no one set of discourses, mechanisms, techniques and procedures distinguishing truth from falsity and giving social sanction is able to dominate entirely. The

52. Quote from Xiaobing Tang “New urban culture and the anxiety of everyday life in contemporary China,” p. 112. See also Dirlik and Zhang, “Introduction: postmodernism and China”; Liu Kang, “Popular culture and the culture of the masses in contemporary China,” *Boundary 2*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Fall 1997), pp. 99–122.

53. Ann Anagnost, *National Past-times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 10.

54. Foucault, “Truth and power,” p. 131.

two contrasting principles of news production underpinning news from China and Hong Kong are both founded upon notions of some mythical “liberating” truth of free spirits. Yet how they end up with quite different versions of what that truth entails makes it abundantly clear that how one enunciates truth is fundamentally more important than any such truth in itself. A neutral truth rarely, if ever, presents itself before Guangzhou’s news audiences. At the same time, the suspicions that each form of news production has of its rival serve to undermine constantly the legitimacies of both. Broader discourses of government rhetoric and policy implementation as well as how those are experienced in people’s everyday lives inevitably figure in the complex manifestations of truth formation that people are embroiled in.

Importantly, this is not to say that there is no truth to the news in Guangzhou. Quite to the contrary, there is a proliferation of truths which can be drawn from diverse sources of legitimation including Party rhetoric, government policy, suspicion of either of those, notions of external uncensored objectivity or personal experiences. An example may clarify. I was once eating dinner with a good friend, a salesman for a local state enterprise in his early 30s, and his eight-year-old niece. The television was on CCTV1 showing a much-hyped daily serial about life in the army, a programme that my friend’s niece had been following and had wanted to watch. There was a scene in which a manageress of a luxury hotel was visited in her office by a relative who was looking for work. To her relative’s request, she replied that the only job she could offer was as a cleaner for the main lobby, that is, the lowest grade of work. The relative left angry and disgusted though she later took up the job. On seeing the office scene, my friend laughed and shook his head in disbelief. He explained that this absolutely could not happen in China: the relative would not have been offered such a lowly position and indeed would probably have been given a much higher one. He was totally dismissive of the programme saying that this was precisely why he disbelieved CCTV more than anything else. Such programmes he said, putting it mildly, “had government things in them.”

However, it was relevant that this salesman had that week been effectively made redundant through a complex set of internal political manoeuvres which basically came down to people high in the company where he worked looking after their own family interests. Although he was often sceptical about Chinese television and news media, his scepticism about the programme was inflected by his own recent experiences. Yet he was also a keen regular viewer of CCTV2, the economic and business channel, which he explained to be interesting because of its educative and practical qualities. CCTV2 was no less politically informed or controlled than any other channel in China. However, he did not voice his scepticism of Party media production in relation to CCTV2 as he did with CCTV1. This channel was for him informative reporting so he would readily slip between legitimations of truth: in this case the rejection of government-controlled programming on the one hand and acceptance of it as objectively useful on the other. At the same time his viewing

of Hong Kong television news (he usually watched Hong Kong television out of preference) could similarly exhibit at times its acceptance as an objectively presented truth and at others its rejection as sensationalist news production.

This example demonstrates the complex practices of articulation in which mediated “realities” are dealt with and related to the practices of people’s everyday lives. They must also be considered in relation to power. Anagnost’s reference to “multiple subjectivities” is apposite here for what is being dealt with is the destabilizing effect of contending regimes of truth.⁵⁵

This situation is most effectively characterized as a hegemony.⁵⁶ Such a characterization enables emphasis of two crucial points. First, that this is not nihilism, in the absence of one legitimating truth, nor anarchy and the formation of any political vacuum. The Party in this sense is still unquestionably dominant. Secondly, and by contrast, the acknowledgment of the Party’s power in China as hegemonic emphasizes also its limitations. As shown above, the Party’s forms of subjectification are themselves contradictory. They cannot pretend to any effective totalization while contending subject positions are increasingly available to people in Guangzhou.⁵⁷ Moreover, as this process continues and the anachronisms of Party-media practices become ever more evident, it seems inevitable that this hegemony will become steadily more fragile. Yet this still leaves the question of how it is that the Party nevertheless maintains its dominant position within the hegemony.

The answer is suggested by considering the comments of a television journalist in Guangzhou which were representative of comments made by most of the journalists I have interviewed. Having explained, and shown some disliking for, the role of news media as the mouthpiece of the Party, she contrasted the Chinese situation with that overseas. Foreign television stations, she pointed out, regarded being objective in terms of showing the different sides of a story. In China such a view was considered too complex for some people. One had to take the overall national picture into account and the importance of everyone’s greatest fear: chaos (*luan*). Many people have a low educational level and if one were to show them too many sides to a story then they would be easily confused (*hunluan*, literally “mixed up and in chaos”). This was also the justification for the censoring of Hong Kong television. Many people may not fully understand it and may get confused. People with a higher educational level

55. See above. I suggest, however, that it is more useful to think not in terms of subjectivities but of subject positions: the multiple truths of Guangzhou’s mediated realities don’t so much produce subjects as make available subject positions between which people may effortlessly move. See Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 61, on the distinction between subjects and subject positions which I follow.

56. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985); Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*.

57. Cf. Anagnost, *National Past-times*; Dirlik and Zhang, “Introduction: postmodernism and China.”

including herself, she explained, may feel aggravated if a story was censored. However, she thought most people also understood the reasoning behind why it had to be done. It was not ideal but necessary. This last point is crucial for understanding the workings of this hegemony. It shows how the rhetoric of an overall good, of the mutual implication of citizens in a national project with national interests, still held sway despite the flourishing array of alternative identifications which have become available to people.

However, journalists would at the same time voice concern about the totalitarian implications of such a paternalistic attitude. Thus it might be argued that many of them would not strictly “believe” in it: it was not ideal. What is important, however, is not whether journalists believe in such a position but that they reproduce the argument in their justifications of either the status quo or of only gradual change, and more importantly they *act*, in their daily practices of news production, in accordance with such an attitude. This is how the hegemony has been perpetuated. It does not rely on belief but on compliance.

The fear of “chaos” was a consistent theme in explanations and justifications of media control, including the censorship of Hong Kong television news, which people from many walks of life in Guangzhou gave. The word *luan* harked back to the official accounts of 1989, but some people, especially those old enough to have lived through it, referred to the chaos of the Cultural Revolution or the disruptive years of civil war. The fear of chaos was able to provide a legitimating rationalization of government control even for many of those who advocated media liberalization and found censorship annoying at least and detestable at most. Hence there is an irony which pervades this situation and lies at the heart of the hegemonic formation. The very common distaste for media control among journalists and others in Guangzhou was juxtaposed, more or less willingly, with the acceptance, or at least reiteration, of the official rationalization of that control, disseminated itself partly by that media.

Laclau uses the notion of an “empty signifier” to point to a discursive marker which works to emphasize relations of equivalence among a community by supplying a notional “constitutive lack” in opposition to which relations of difference can be downplayed.⁵⁸ So in the context of Chinese media production and control, “chaos” or “social disorder” comes to serve as one of several “empty signifiers” around which a hegemony is perpetuated.⁵⁹ In this case, the fear of chaos often serves to

58. Ernesto Laclau, “Why do empty signifiers matter to politics?” in *Emancipations* (London: Verso, 1996).

59. Others would include, for instance, the “problem” of China’s large and ever growing population. Hence, Anagnost argues that “the discourse of the Chinese socialist party-state constructs China’s population as ‘too large’ and mobilizes images of the body as being consuming or producing. These images are intrinsic to the pedagogical imperatives and disciplinary practices of the Chinese socialist state in ways that serve to displace political critique of the internal contradictions of Chinese socialism” (*National Past-times*, p. 12). She adds: “Mapping the complex ways in which notions about population circulate throughout Chinese society helps us to account for the hegemonic power of China’s population policy” (p. 137).

draw together people who have divergent opinions, and who hold possibly incompatible positions on media control, to legitimate the status quo portrayed as a state of relative stability. It also works to play down the contradictions of Party policy and society more generally. Furthermore, the Party maintains its hold on power through the perceived necessity, which this rhetoric engenders, that it is the only viable alternative to social disorder. This is in spite of the sometimes vehement dislike for its techniques of governance to be found among even those that serve to perpetuate it. What is at issue is “how the ritualized forms of subject production project representations of the party-state as a subject written large, as the unified voice of the people as one – a projection that conceals the fragmentation and diversity within not only the national community but also the party organization itself.”⁶⁰

Chaos as an empty signifier in this sense also exhibits a double movement which once again highlights the hegemonic, hence fragile, nature of this discursive formation. On the one hand, it unifies and creates relations of equivalence with the effect of discursively erasing differences. That is what makes it function as an empty signifier. Yet, on the other hand, it also comes to articulate those differences in that it is always someone else who represents the threat of impending chaos, the threat to that unity: the poor, the uneducated, the rural, the floating migrant population and so on. Thus at the very moment that the name and the cause of unity is enunciated it simultaneously articulates the differences which it seeks to erase as an empty signifier.

Conclusion

In the mediated worlds of Guangzhou’s inhabitants, truths have become remarkably contingent and always potentially destabilized by contending formulations, sources and legitimations of what is true. It is important to note that the configuration of media and practices of news production and consumption in Guangdong is in some ways specific to the region. However, it is also important to note that many of the factors affecting Guangdong media producers also apply in other parts of China. For instance, although the juxtaposition of Hong Kong news with mainland Chinese news is not the same in other parts of in China, media production is being commercialized nationally and the pressures of the market are not by any means restricted to the south. Thus, many of the conflicting pressures on Guangdong’s journalists are similarly bearing down upon media producers in other regions of China. At the same time, journalists and their audiences throughout China, though especially in the large cities, increasingly have access to alternative sources of news and information.

60. *Ibid.* p. 12. Compare also Dirlik and Zhang, “Introduction: postmodernism and China,” p. 8, for a similar argument about fragmentation, subjectivity and the undermining of past narratives.

This article has argued that the notion of truth is of fundamental importance to the understanding of news. In Western media studies the identification of ideological effects of news production has led to critiques of how the maintenance of the appearances of objectivity and truth underpins the believability of news media. This article has elaborated what may loosely be taken as some of the “literacies of realism” that pertain to the ever more diverse landscape of news media in Guangzhou. However, what emerges from this investigation is a quite different set of conclusions regarding truth, news production and Party hegemony.

With regard to mainland Chinese news production, any argument based upon the unnoticed ideological effects of news is immediately invalidated by the open acknowledgment of, indeed the vociferous demand for, the ideological and pedagogical role of the media in China. There is no pretence at an external objectivity which must function to maintain the hidden ideological effects of news. Rather those ideological effects are taken as precisely the legitimation of its regime of truth. Once this is acknowledged, it becomes clear that truth has a quite different social history in the Chinese context from that in Euro-American ones. That is not to say that Western news values and principles are not important in the Guangzhou context. Indeed Chinese news production has been juxtaposed with Hong Kong news production for at least two decades. Hence, Hong Kong news, produced according to principles of truth and objectivity which are quite different from Chinese ones, presents news audiences with a view of the world based upon fundamentally different assumptions.

Although in the reform period the market, consumption and media have replaced the narratives of revolutionary utopianism as the motor of social change, the resulting “fragmentation” or “multiplication of subjectivities” should not be seen as a simple replacement of one order by another. It is important not to dismiss past political and discursive narratives too readily, for it is their continued coexistence alongside newer rhetorics of consumerism and individual responsibility that constitutes this sense of plurality. Hence, it is the juxtaposition of Party control and spreading market competition that characterizes the uniqueness of China’s media landscape. It is also important not to dismiss past narratives for, though they may have been weakened in their rhetorical force, they are nevertheless still able to carry weight among important sections of the population. Indeed, how they do so is crucial to the maintenance of Party power in China. Furthermore, any “fragmentation,” “plurality” or “multiplication of subjectivities” is not to be seen in terms of an ensuing anarchy. Rather, the situation is better characterized as a more or less fragile hegemony of truths in which the Party still clearly plays a dominant role.

What is significant in relation to media, however, is that the proliferation of external sources of news and information, the commercialization of the media, and the associated emergence of contending “regimes of truth” in the practices of Chinese news production mark the proliferation

of antagonistic forces within the hegemony and therefore also its increasing fragility. Put simply, the Party's dominance in this hegemony is founded upon ideologies and practices that predate the reform period and, as Chinese society continues to change, the anachronistic nature of this foundation becomes increasingly apparent. Where once the Party's dominance in China was supported by the assumption of one ultimate truth, legitimated by a virtually hermetic Party propaganda machine, now it must rely on the acquiescence of a population increasingly aware of and desiring alternatives. This hegemony, and the Party's domination of it, is perpetuated by the circulation of certain "empty signifiers" such as the fear of chaos, social disorder and the potential ungovernability of China's huge population.

Furthermore, the workings of this hegemonic formation cannot be divorced from the emergence and perception of social divisions in contemporary China. For instance, the emphasis placed on education in this discourse of chaos reveals how this hegemony is based upon perceived social divisions: between those who are uneducated and for whom pedagogical media are necessary, and those who are educated and to whom the arguments do not apply. Importantly, the educative function that underpins news production is therefore attributed to it not only by the Party but also by those who are reluctantly responsible for executing it, that is journalists. However, those who associate low educational levels with the need for Party control of the media do so from a position of presumed privilege. They assume that such arguments do not apply to themselves, since they are educated and fully understand the situation. The problem of low educational levels is, in fact, always articulated in relation to others. The irony here is that those who are in the key positions to subvert the mechanisms of Party control, and in some ways do so on a daily basis, are precisely those who perpetuate the Party's domination of the hegemony by appeal to such discourses of chaos.⁶¹

Because of the heavy propaganda responsibilities conferred upon the media in China, the Party's paranoia for control has not waned even as the effects of reform have gradually altered media production beyond recognition. Consequently, as China reaches the end of the 1990s, the contradictions and anachronisms typical of the period are increasingly manifest in the practices of both producers and consumers of media representations. Most journalists, even though quietly or reluctantly acquiescing to the rhetorics that perpetuate the hegemony, nevertheless generally adhere to hopes and expectations of change in the direction

61. An interesting question then is to what extent those who have most benefited from the reforms, China's nouveau riches, similarly reproduce these hegemonic arguments. My research on this is limited but indications are that they do. If so, the irony is even greater, for it is then precisely those whose new economic power might otherwise lead to the most direct challenges to government authority who maintain the hegemony for the Party through the discourses of chaos and an unmanageable uneducated population. I am indebted to one of the *The China Quarterly's* anonymous readers for this observation.

of liberalization. It might be argued that this is a new self-deluding utopianism but if so it is one that cannot defer forever. The Party's dominant role in China's mediated hegemony has come to look increasingly susceptible to scepticism and the exposure of its anachronisms and this susceptibility is one that the Party will not be able to ignore forever.