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**CONTROL, RESISTANCE AND NEGOTIATION:  
HOW THE CHINESE MEDIA CARVE OUT GREATER SPACE  
FOR AUTONOMY**

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**CONTROL, RESISTANCE AND NEGOTIATION:  
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Xiaoling Zhang

**Abstract**

Has increasing economic liberalization of the Chinese media resulted in proportional political liberalization? As the media are critically important to any modern political system, this question goes to the heart of understanding the transformation of contemporary politics in the People's Republic of China. This article argues that viewing Chinese media reform in terms of an ongoing adversarial struggle between centralized state control and the forces unleashed by marketization, globalisation and new media has several pitfalls. First of all, this is based on the assumption that these forces and the state are inherently in conflict, neglecting the fact that these forces have been unleashed by the state and contribute to its legitimacy. Second, it suggests a rather monolithic view of the state which, focused on the task of staying in power, has been actively adjusting its political system in accordance with changing social and economic conditions. Yongnian Zheng in his article in this issue posits that the most powerful driving force behind China's rapid transformation is its openness, which has brought about many social consequences. This article, greatly inspired by Gramsci's theory of hegemony, argues that one of the consequences of China's openness is that China is moving towards hegemonic rule which, according to Gramsci, is characterised by a combination of coercion and consensus. This article therefore argues that while such frameworks as "market vs. state" hold validity at certain levels of analysis, the relationship characterised by negotiation between the state and media in the current political context should also be considered to comprise major dynamics in China's media transformation process. To provide concrete details and contextualised understandings of how negotiation may take place, the article examines the discourses of media professionals and scholars in negotiating with the state for more space of autonomy through a case study of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake coverage.

**Control, Resistance and Negotiation:  
How the Chinese media carve out greater space for autonomy**

Xiaoling Zhang<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

Has increasing economic liberalization of the Chinese media resulted in proportional political liberalization? As the media are critically important to any modern political system, this question goes to the heart of understanding the transformation of contemporary politics in the People's Republic of China. In assessing the transformation of Chinese media since 1978 voluminous literature has been written on the dynamics that drive the transformation of Chinese media, which include such forces as marketization, globalisation and new media technologies.<sup>2</sup> However, this article argues that viewing Chinese media reform in terms of an ongoing adversarial struggle between centralized state control and the forces unleashed by marketization, globalisation and new media has several pitfalls. First of all, this is based on the assumption that these forces and the state are inherently in conflict, neglecting the fact that these forces have been unleashed by the state and contribute to its legitimacy. Second, it suggests a rather monolithic view of the state which, focused on the task of staying in power, has been actively adjusting its political system in accordance with changing social and economic conditions. Yongnian Zheng in his article in this issue posits that the most powerful driving force behind China's rapid transformation is its openness, which has brought about many social consequences. This article, greatly inspired by Gramsci's theory of hegemony,<sup>3</sup> argues that one of the consequences of China's openness is that China is moving towards hegemonic rule which, according to Gramsci, is characterised by a combination of coercion and consensus. It is true that the media, like other social forces in China, "are not autonomous in pursuing their own development because they depend on their relations with the government,"<sup>4</sup> and yet due to their significant role in the attainment and maintenance of consent because of their ability to organise popular world-views, a unique system or relationship "marked by negotiation has developed between state

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Xiaoling Zhang is Lecturer at the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies, The University of Nottingham. This paper was presented at the International Forum for Contemporary Chinese Studies Inaugural Conference at Nottingham, 19-21 November 2008.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Roya Akhavan-Majid, "Mass Media Reform in China", *Gazette* 66, no. 6 (2004): 553-65.

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Gramsci, 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, eds. And trans. New York: International Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> Yongnian Zheng, 2007 *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China*, Stanford University Press, p. xvii.

authorities and regulators and media and cultural units.”<sup>5</sup> This article therefore argues that while such frameworks as “market vs. state” hold validity at certain levels of analysis, the relationship characterised by negotiation between the state and media in the current political context should also be considered to comprise major dynamics in China’s media transformation process. To provide concrete details and contextualised understandings of how negotiation may take place, the article examines the discourses of media professionals and scholars in negotiating with the state for more space of autonomy through a case study of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake coverage.

### **The shake-up of the Chinese media**

As China accelerated its image construction before the opening of the 2008 Olympics, its efforts were hotly contested by many global actors months before the Olympics: first it was the Tibetan Riot in March and then the protests following the Olympic torch relay outside China. Late and little coverage of these events by the Chinese media caused much dissatisfaction and controversy both domestically and in the world.<sup>6</sup> It seemed that the limited space of relative autonomy that media outlets had carved out for themselves in the past few years had been taken back because of the upcoming Olympic Games. However, in May 2008, the Chinese media broke free of their reputation as propaganda instruments of the party-state through their coverage of the Sichuan Earthquake. What made the coverage unique was that for the first time, the Chinese media had reported on a breaking news event before getting approval from the Central Government.<sup>7</sup> Take China Central Television (CCTV) as an example. According to Zhao Huayong, president of CCTV,<sup>8</sup> the earthquake took place at 14:28 on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May and at 14:50, it started to broadcast news of the earthquake by rolling tickers and at 15:00, by presenters. At 15:20, the News Channel started the special program “Exclusive Reports on Wenchuan.” Over the next few days, CCTV News Channel, CCTV-1, CCTV-4 and CCTV-9 all suspended their regular programs to

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<sup>5</sup> Stanley Rosen, 2008 “Foreword” in Ying Zhu, *Television in Post-reform China: Serial Dramas, Confucian Leadership and the global television market*, London: Routledge, pp. XIV – XXII.

<sup>6</sup> Zhou Xiaopu 2008 “The 2008 Dialectics” in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 7 – 16.

<sup>7</sup> Shao Peiren and Pan Xianghui 2008 “The Inherent Linkage between Crises and Media System Innovation Reviewed from the Wenchuan Earthquake,” in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 116 – 125.

<sup>8</sup> Zhao Huayong, 2008 “Respect Laws Governing News and Perfect Emergency Contingency System”, in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. I – X.

provide live coverage of the disaster, turning the earthquake into a global media event.<sup>9</sup>

As a rule, the Chinese state media follow the rule of “reporting timely,” which means reporting timely to the above.<sup>10</sup> They do not aim to be “the fastest, but the most correct.”<sup>11</sup> As a result although CCTV has set up the News Channel since 2003 to provide a platform for live coverage, CCTV mainly carries out live coverage of events that they can plan in advance.<sup>12</sup> This time, instead of “holding meetings to disseminate the directions from the Central Government,”<sup>13</sup> the Chinese media took advantage of the scale of the disaster and allowed their media logic to prevail over party logic. The way Chinese state media responded to the event was hailed by many Chinese media professionals as well as academics as a milestone in the history of media.<sup>14</sup> In the words of Bai Yansong, a household name for live coverage in China, “this time, it is not a simple live coverage.”<sup>15</sup> Many observers of China also commented that the coverage of the Sichuan disaster may have wider political implications. Has it transformed the way Chinese media professionals do their jobs, promote liberalization, and helped to bring about a new age of transparency and accountability for Chinese media and the state itself?

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<sup>9</sup> Shao Peiren and Pan Xianghui 2008 “The Inherent Linkage between Crises and Media System Innovation Reviewed from the Wenchuan Earthquake,” in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 116 – 125.

<sup>10</sup> Bao Junhao, 2008 “Timely Report This Time Vs. Timely Report to the Above before”, *Southern Weekend*, 22 May, page 30

<sup>11</sup> Lu Di and Gao Fei 2008 “The Power of Media and Its Inspirations,” in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 87 – 91.

<sup>12</sup> Ye Fengying 2008 “Devastating Earthquake: Rebuilding the Media Image of China Central Television”, in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 283 – 291.

<sup>13</sup> Shao Peiren and Pan Xianghui 2008 “The Inherent Linkage between Crises and Media System Innovation Reviewed from the Wenchuan Earthquake,” in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 116 – 125. 119

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Fang Hanqi 2008 “Live Broadcast of Disaster – A Milestone in China’s History of Journalism”, in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 1 – 6; Du Junfei 2008 “The Road to Openness: the Communication Legacy of the Wenchuan Earthquake”, in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 30 – 38; Shao Peiren and Pan Xianghui 2008 “The Inherent Linkage between Crises and Media System Innovation Reviewed from the Wenchuan Earthquake,” in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 116 – 125; Zhou Haiyan, 2008 “The Beginning and Ending of News Power” in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 215 – 226; Fong Zhirong, 2008 “Progress and Innovation of Media in the Coverage of the Earthquake,” *Modern Audio-Video Arts*, No 6. Pp. 9-11.

<sup>15</sup> Shao Peiren and Pan Xianghui 2008 “The Inherent Linkage between Crises and Media System Innovation, p. 121

## **Gramsci's theory of hegemony, research methods and objectives**

This article does not try to offer a simple answer to the question above. To do that will be to deny the complex nature of any ongoing transformations. Instead it tries to find out how media scholars and professionals make use of this breakthrough to negotiate with the state for more autonomy. From this perspective, the transformation of media is not just the result of tense adversarial struggles between a control-freak party-state and freedom-seeking media workers. Rather, it is that of a far more complex and diverse process of tense negotiation between the state that needs the media to help it "educate" the people to accept the economic, social and political order on which to build consensus,<sup>16</sup> and the media that is well aware of its new bargaining power brought about through its important role in helping to obtain popular support for the government.

This perspective draws from Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony as a means to capture power dynamics and power differences and to show the ways and means by which power persists and endures over time within modern bourgeois society.<sup>17</sup> He emphasized that politics and political activity is fundamentally centred on attaining and maintaining power, which is constructed by a dual or dyadic opposition: force and consent, violence and persuasion. In Gramsci, hegemony means the supremacy of one group or class over other classes or groups by means other than reliance on violence or coercion. In other words, hegemony is "a relation, not of domination by means of force, but of consent by means of political and ideological leadership. It is the organisation of consent".<sup>18</sup>

Gramsci, writing at the beginning of the process of globalisation with all his concerns set within the global perspective of the 1930s, famously claimed that while in the West rule was already hegemonic, in the East rule was still more by naked force of the state.<sup>19</sup> Today, however, "under global capitalism, in all cases, at all times, and in all places, all rule combined both force and consensus, or hegemony, whatever the practical mix of force and consensus".<sup>20</sup> The concept of hegemony is of particular relevance and has great explanatory value to the understanding and explanation of the strength and the resilience of the political power structure in transitional and

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<sup>16</sup> Alastair Davidson, 2008 "Hegemony, Language and Popular Wisdom in the Asia Pacific", in Richard Howson and Kylie Smith (eds.) *Hegemony: Studies in Consensus and Coercion*, London: Routledge, pp. 63 – 79.

<sup>17</sup> Benedetto Fontana, 2008 "Hegemony and Power in Gramsci" in Richard Howson and Kylie Smith *Hegemony: Studies in Consensus and Coercion*, London: Routledge. Pp. 81 – 105. 84

<sup>18</sup> R. Simon, 1991, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction*. London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd., p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Alastair Davidson, 2008 "Hegemony, Language and Popular Wisdom in the Asia Pacific", in Richard Howson and Kylie Smith (eds.) *Hegemony: Studies in Consensus and Coercion*, London: Routledge, pp. 63 – 79.

<sup>20</sup> Alastair Davidson, 2008 "Hegemony, Language and Popular Wisdom in the Asia Pacific", in Richard Howson and Kylie Smith (eds.) *Hegemony*, London: Routledge, pp. 63 – 79.

transformational China. Economically, China is pulling off one of the most successful economic transitions in history whilst maintaining politically a one-party political system. This political power structure appears relatively strong and has provided a basis for some resistance to pressure for neoliberal "reform." But as Zheng points out in his article here, openness has linked China and the world together, with the interaction between China and the world producing the external dynamics that lead to changes within the latter. In the contemporary world debates about the role of the state now centre on good governance, ideology, civil society, the rule of law and the importance of institutions in the creation of viable states.<sup>21</sup> Those states that lack these characteristics are said to have "failed," or at least be failing.<sup>22</sup> The party-state, as a result of openness to the world, is moving towards hegemonic rule and in the construction of hegemony, the state tries to develop a form of leadership which helps the party-state to legitimise its authority and to rule over society. The recruitment of private entrepreneurs into the Party is an example of the CCP adjusting itself to suit China's changing political reality.

Gramsci's emphasis on the moment of consent, of persuasion, and of leadership leads him to construct a theory of intellectuals and their role.<sup>23</sup> Intellectuals are the "organisers" of consent and persuasion through ideological apparatus such as education and mass media. From a Gramscian perspective, the state relies on the moral, intellectual and cultural system not only for justifying and maintaining its dominance, but also for winning the consent of those whom it rules. The media act as links or mediators between society and the state for the achievement of stability, legitimacy, and persistence of the overall socio-political system. As the state is faced with an increasingly complex society that is more empowered by forces brought by globalisation, marketization, new media technologies and above all, openness, it needs a media that is more sophisticated and more articulate in mass persuasion and mass mobilisation to ensure the party-state's ideology is accepted or adopted by society as their own view. Because of their popular nature, media organisations are in a position to organise various social forces around particular populist causes such as social justice,

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<sup>21</sup> F. Fukuyama, 2004, *State building: Governance and World Order in the Twenty First Century*. London: Profile Books.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., J. G. Gros., 1996, "Toward a Taxonomy of Failed States in the New World Order: Decaying Somalia, Liberia, Rwanda and Haiti". *Third World Quarterly* 17 (3): 458 – 461; Robert Kaplan, 2006 *The Coming Anarchy*. In *Class Readings and Contemporary Debates in International Relations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Eds. P. Williams, D. M. Goldstein, and J.M Shafritz. Belmont, California: Thomson Wadsworth; R. I. Rotberg 2005 *Failed States, Civil Wars and Nation Building in International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, 7th edition, eds. R. J. Art and R. Jarvis. New York: Pearson Longman.

<sup>23</sup> Benedetto Fontana, 2008 "Hegemony and Power in Gramsci" in Richard Howson and Kylie Smith *Hegemony: Studies in Consensus and Coercion*, London: Routledge. Pp. 81 – 105. 85

stability, harmony and economic development. This position lends the media much bargaining or negotiating power with the state.

To reveal how media scholars and professionals seize the opportunity presented by the well-received breakthrough in Sichuan Earthquake coverage to negotiate with the state for more autonomy, the article examines two sites for the discourses of media academics and professionals. The first examined site is the *China Academic Journals Database* which covers more than 8,000 academic and policy journals. A search of the word "earthquake" in abstracts from June to the end of 2008 brings up 458 articles. The second is the book series entitled *Convulsion* (震撼) (*Convulsion: TV files; Convulsion: Field Notes from Media Workers; Convulsion: Media Reflections*). This series, edited by CCTV News Centre and published on 5 July, 2008, less than two months after the earthquake, is a large collection of works by media academics and stories by media professionals providing valuable insights into the response of the state media to the earthquake, the Central Government's response to the way the quake was covered, and above all, how media workers and scholars use the well-received breakthrough to push the state for more openness. The examination is enhanced by interviews with media practitioners and academics in the summer of 2008, which helps the author to critically evaluate the discourses from the examined sites. The purpose of the examination is therefore three-fold. First, what drove Chinese state media such as CCTV to risk breaking regulations? Secondly, how did the Central Government respond to the media-led breakthrough? Answers to these questions prepare the ground for the final one, and that is, how media scholars and professionals seize the opportunity of this well-received breakthrough to renegotiate the power balance between the state authority, regulators and the media.

### **Drive behind the breakthrough in the eyes of media academics and professionals**

Discourses from the examined sites attribute the swift response of the Central Government and the unprecedented information openness to a number of reasons. On the part of the Central Government, a lesson was learned from Burma, where the government was accused by the international community of its slow rescue efforts when the country was hit by a tropical cyclone in early May 2008. Secondly, Chinese media reports on the riot in Tibet in March had caused worldwide controversy and led to damaging protests throughout the Olympic Torch relay starting on March 24, 2008. The Chinese government was therefore acutely aware of the need to perform this task efficiently.

On the part of the media, different forces stemming from marketization, globalization, new media and other developments have in the past decade affected

significant shifts in the industry. In the studied discourses marketization is considered the leading force that drives media to privilege “media logic” as much as “party logic,” with the effect of the media taking more risks including breaking regulations to attract bigger audiences and advertisements.<sup>24</sup> Their aggressive pursuit of commercial goals has given rise to falsified news such as the case of the “paper filling baozi.”<sup>25</sup> The credibility of the Chinese state media has suffered greatly as a result. As China’s state media face increasing competition from media in other forms and from other places, they have something to prove: namely, their continued relevance and authority in a changing media landscape. The government’s promise to the world to be more open before the 2008 Olympic Games, underscored by its implementation of the Regulations on Open Government Information on May 1, twelve days before the earthquake, had emboldened media workers to act quickly, especially as the earthquake was considered by many to be a rare occasion of when media logic and party logic converge.<sup>26</sup> “We know the directives from the Propaganda Department exist, but if the leadership finds that greater openness serves their interests, maybe they’ll reconsider how they handle these things generally.”<sup>27</sup>

Another strong incentive for breaking the ground, according to the examined discourses, is the media professional’s ambition for global media status. With neck-breaking speed in economic growth in the past two decades, the Chinese media industry has expanded at an incredible pace domestically and internationally, with the former being more profit driven and the latter more state-driven. Whether for political or commercial reasons, the Chinese media have been attempting to compete with transnational media companies for the global flow of information. CCTV, for one, craves to have a CCTV-effect,<sup>28</sup> and an agenda-setting effect and a role in the shaping of world politics, as the discourses reveal.<sup>29</sup> They believe that on its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary<sup>30</sup>,

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<sup>24</sup> Shao Peiren and Pan Xianghui 2008 “The Inherent Linkage between Crises and Media System Innovation Reviewed from the Wenchuan Earthquake,” in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. P. 125.

<sup>25</sup> In July 2007, a rare piece of news broke in Beijing: a stall selling *baozi* in Beijing was using minced up cardboard boxes as the filling. The story was uncovered by Beijing TV, which provided evidence by secret filming of the process. However, a few days later, Beijing TV admitted that the news report was a fake by one of its producers and made a public apology.

<sup>26</sup> Zhan Jiang and Wang Jindong 2008 “TV Communications: Concept Change, System Build-up and Practice”, in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 157 – 163. 160

<sup>27</sup> Maureen Fan, “Chinese Media Take Firm Stand On Openness About Earthquake,” *Washington Post Foreign Service*, Sunday, May 18, 2008; Page A18, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/17/AR2008051701790.html>, accessed on 30 April, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Ren Yuan, 2008 “Will ‘CCTV Effect’ Start from Here?” in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 292 – 301.

<sup>29</sup> E.g., Ren Yuan, 2008 “Will ‘CCTV Effect’ Start from Here?” in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. P. 296; Guan Shiji et al. 2008 “An Effect Analysis of the Influence that China Central Television’s Live Broadcast of the Earthquake Relief Has on American Mainstream Media”, in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 302 – 318.

CCTV has become powerful enough to compete with world-class media.<sup>31</sup> It is therefore not surprising that media professionals, who work within both political and commercial constraints, take the earthquake more as an opportunity than a challenge. They compare the opportunity the earthquake brings to CCTV to that brought by the Gulf War to CNN, 11/9 to Phoenix, and the Iraq War to the rise of Al-Jazeera.<sup>32</sup> Some even see the disaster as a god-sent gift for restoring the credibility of Chinese TV and for furthering media reform.<sup>33</sup>

### **Government's response to the media-led breakthrough**

How did the government react to the unprecedented media coverage? Media professionals confirmed that the Central Propaganda Department went through two stages: when the earthquake first struck, it seemed to be shocked and disoriented, which explains why its initial response was clumsy, guided by its old instinct: a few hours after the quake occurred, an order was issued to Chinese news organisations to not send reporters to the scene, and that they should only use information released by either CCTV or Xinhua News Agency.<sup>34</sup>

However, they also show that the Central Government soon recovered from its shock and changed its stance to not only tolerance, but an opportunistic one taking advantage of the moment for image construction and demonstration of leadership.<sup>36</sup> The Propaganda Department ordered CCTV to broadcast Wen's speech on his flight to Chengdu in the "National News Network Broadcast (Xinwen Lianbo)" on the same night;<sup>37</sup> and very soon after, the Propaganda Department started to change its usual practice by lifting restrictions on the report of the event to not only domestic reporters

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<sup>30</sup> CCTV (known as Beijing TV Station before it changed its name to CCTV in the 1970s) started its operation in May 1958.

<sup>31</sup> Shi Tongyu 2008 "The Significance and Value of CCTV's Live Coverage of the Earthquake," *China Radio and TV Academic Journal*, No. 7, pp. 64 – 66.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Liang Xiaotao 2008 "Record of History," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. XVI – XVIII.

<sup>33</sup> Hu Zhifeng, Fight for Dignity – An Analysis and Reflection of the Special Television Live Broadcast of the Sichuan Earthquake," in Ren Yuan, 2008 "Will 'CCTV Effect' Start from Here?" in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 39 – 46; Shi Tongyu 2008 "The Significance and Value of CCTV's Live Coverage of the Earthquake," *China Radio and TV Academic Journal*, No. 7, pp. 64 – 66; Cao Yue 2008 "240 Seconds," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Field Notes* 54 – 58. From ME

<sup>34</sup> Guan Shiji et al. 2008 "An Effect Analysis of the Influence that China Central Television's Live Broadcast of the Earthquake Relief Has on American Mainstream Media", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. P. 311; Han Song, Guan Xiaoshu and Du Zhen 2008 "Xinhua News Agency: Overseas Communication of the Sichuan Earthquake Met the International Level", *Overseas Communication*, No. 6. P. 46-48.

<sup>36</sup> Chen Lidan 2008 "New Thinking Brought by the Wenchuan Earthquake Report", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 164- 174.

<sup>37</sup> Liang Xiaotao (ed.) 2008 *Convulsion: TV Files*, p.18.

but also overseas media.<sup>38</sup> Over 1700 journalists therefore went to the site for coverage.<sup>39</sup> Instead of trying to stop the media-led breakthrough, better management was exercised. Li Changchun, the propaganda chief of the Communist Party, called CCTV president Zhao Huayong on the 14<sup>th</sup>. While speaking highly of CCTV's live coverage, he also made many detailed requests such as adding rolling captions, changing pictures and maps, providing safety advice on earthquakes, and instructions for presenters to be flexible as well as sympathetic.<sup>40</sup> Coupled with close supervision was constant encouragement from central government leaders.<sup>41</sup> On the 17<sup>th</sup> of May, Li visited CCTV to give further directions and encouragement: "Your work won great appreciation from the Party and the State Council, setting up a great example for the whole nation, and winning praise from the international community. You have proved to be politically trustworthy, professionally capable, highly disciplined and hard working".<sup>42</sup> On 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> of June, he went to visit reporters in Sichuan to reinforce his grip.

Both academics and media professionals also commented on the leaders' more professional manner in front of the camera. They believe that Chinese leaders are coming to accept the concept of "governing by media" -- a core concept in western political communication.<sup>43</sup>

### **Different views**

While some celebrate the unprecedented coverage, there are also some who take a more pessimistic view. Some of them attribute this media-led breakthrough and the government's swift response to the unprecedented scale of the disaster,<sup>44</sup> while others believe that rather than an indication of increased independence, the breakthrough actually comes from a shift in the government's preferences: "when the government believes that 'it is better to control media', then it will control the media. If the government believes that 'it is to the best interest of the government to let the media report on the disaster', then it will support or take acquiescence of the media's reports".<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Shi Tongyu 2008 "The Significance and Value of CCTV's Live Coverage of the Earthquake," *China Radio and TV Academic Journal*, No. 7, pp. 64 - 66.

<sup>39</sup> Liu Xiaoyan, 2008 "1,700 Journalists at the Affected Site" *International News Circle*. No. 5. p. 8

<sup>40</sup> Liang Xiaotao (ed.) 2008 *Convulsion: TV Files*. P. 24.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Liang Xiaotao (ed.) 2008 *Convulsion: TV Files*, p. 255.

<sup>43</sup> Fieldnotes 55?

<sup>44</sup> Du Junfei 2008 "The Road to Openness: the Communication Legacy of the Wenchuan Earthquake", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 30 - 38. 34

<sup>45</sup> Shao Peiren and Pan Xianghui 2008 "The Inherent Linkage between Crises and Media System Innovation Reviewed from the Wenchuan Earthquake," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 116 - 125. 122

Indeed some of them believe that the coverage of the quake is hardly a breakthrough, considering the slow response, the lack of in-depth and balanced reports, and the old pattern that was followed by state media.

#### *Old pattern followed*

Some give evidence that CCTV's coverage has followed the traditional pattern, especially after Li Changchun visited CCTV News Centre on May 17<sup>th</sup>.<sup>46</sup> On the night of Li's visit, the National News Network Broadcast added the item "Heroes in the Disaster."<sup>47</sup> Compared with the explosion of information and topics covered at the beginning, CCTV became the mouthpiece of the Central Government again after Li's visit, singing eulogies about "heroes," showing leaders visiting the disaster-struck area, and praising the achievements of the government at all levels.<sup>48</sup>

#### *Slow in response*

Some also feel strongly that at the first moment of the earthquake, the Chinese media had shown hesitation and practiced self-censorship. They were therefore over 20 minutes behind Reuters, with CCTV typically slower than Phoenix for more than 10 minutes. When the news had already appeared on overseas websites for over 10 minutes, Chinese official websites were still silent. They were also slower than Chinese bloggers. Sichuan TV Station was even worse: apart from mentioning the earthquake a few times, most of the programs on the afternoon of 12<sup>th</sup> were irrelevant to the earthquake, and on the evening of the earthquake, the station was even broadcasting TV dramas as usual.<sup>49</sup> The discourses question whether it is due to the media workers' lack of professionalism, or because of the political system in China.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Wang Xu 2008 "To Occupy the Commanding Ground of Public Opinion, in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 106 – 115; Shao Peiren and Pan Xianghui 2008 "The Inherent Linkage between Crises and Media System Innovation Reviewed from the Wenchuan Earthquake," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 116 – 125, 124; Ren Yuan, 2008 "Will 'CCTV Effect' Start from Here?" in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 292 – 301. 296

<sup>47</sup> Shao Peiren and Pan Xianghui 2008 "The Inherent Linkage between Crises and Media System Innovation Reviewed from the Wenchuan Earthquake," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 116 – 125.124

<sup>48</sup> Wang Xu 2008 "To Occupy the Commanding Ground of Public Opinion, in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 106 – 115. 112

<sup>49</sup> Yan Sanjiu and Wang Hu, 2008 "Analysis of Information Openness and Media Coverage Strategies during Crisis," *Journalists*, No. 6. pp. 15 – 20.

<sup>50</sup> Yu Guoming 2008 "The Three Values of News: Openness, Timeliness and Balance – a Reflection on the Build-up off Media Value in National Emergency Response Mechanism in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 26 – 29; Lu Di and Gao Fei 2008 "The Power of Media and its Inspirations", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp.87 – 91; Gao Xin and Zhang Tao "China Central Station's Live Broadcast of the Wenchuan Earthquake from the Perspective of Crisis Communication" in Liang Xiaotao (ed.)

### *Lack of in-depth reports*

As Li Datong,<sup>51</sup> editor of the *China Youth Daily* and former chief-editor of "Freezing Point," tells us, long after 1978, the coverage of crises was considered to damage the image of a country. Since the mid 1990s, the coverage of disasters, especially natural disasters, has become gradually depoliticised and become a norm. As the coverage of disasters always touches upon responsibilities however, such coverage is inevitably sensitive and therefore still come under strict censorship and self-censorship.

All scholars and professionals of media hold the belief that the significance of disaster reporting lies in its investigation of the disaster to inform prevention efforts for future disaster in order to minimise damages.<sup>52</sup> Li Datong believes<sup>53</sup> that although there have been significant improvements in providing information about the disaster, the media have failed to ask questions such as the following: why is the seat of a county built on a rift zone? Why had there been no preparations for the disaster? During the earthquake, over 7,000 schools collapsed and over 10,000 children died. How had these schools been designed and built, and by whom and approved by whom? The rescue troops had repeated what they had done in Tangshan in (YEAR) whereby large numbers of soldiers had arrived at the scene of disaster without the necessary instruments, technology or expertise. Were the troops suitable for the mission? The communication means, field medical teams and rescue forces led by helicopters showed clearly that they were not good enough. Should there be improvements? How? Why did the semi-official Red Cross and charity organisations in China lack credibility?

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*Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 135 – 142; Chen Lidan "New Thinking Brought by the Wenchuan Earthquake Report", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 164 – 174.

<sup>51</sup> Li Datong "The Establishment of Disaster Reporting's Core Value and Mature Mode", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 151 – 156.

<sup>52</sup> Zhu Yujun and Niu Guangxia "A Study on the Humanization Process of Television Communication in the Respect of Live Broadcast of the Wenchuan Earthquake," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 205 – 214; Zhu Chunyang 2008 "The Wenchuan Earthquake: Why Does China Central Television (CCTV) Need this Kind of Live Broadcast", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp.249 – 258; Ye Fengying 2008 "Devastating Earthquake: Rebuilding the Meida Image of China Central Television," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp.283 – 291; Yan Sanjiu and Wang Hu, 2008 "Analysis of Information Openness and Media Coverage Strategies during Crisis," *Journalists*, No. 6. pp. 15 – 20.

<sup>53</sup> Li Datong "The Establishment of Disaster Reporting's Core Value and Mature Mode", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 151 – 156. 154

### *Unbalanced reports*

Some also point out that the coverage on the earthquake was saturated but the area covered was narrow.<sup>54</sup> As reporters followed where leaders go (especially Wen Jiabao) and asked the same questions leaders ask (hence the unbalanced reports on leaders and ordinary people), and also because of the different levels of interference from local governments,<sup>55</sup> there was saturated coverage of the disaster management in Sichuan, compared to that in Shanxi and Gansu, which were neglected by the public.<sup>56</sup>

There is also a consensus among Chinese media scholars and professionals that the government did improve its transparency and timeliness in sending out information. However, information transparency does not mean transparency of different opinions.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the expression of public opinion is allowed or even encouraged, but it has to be consistent with the mainstream opinion and with the voice of the government. Messages on the Internet about the quality of school buildings, the anger of the dead children's parents, the distribution of rescue goods and complaints and appeals from remote areas had been carefully filtered out.<sup>58</sup> They also point to the lack of reports on NGOs.<sup>59</sup> Neither were there enough reports about the distribution of rescue goods.

### **Negotiation toward a more relaxed media policy**

Under the evolving political, economic and social conditions, the media in China are expected to do many things: to be commercially successful in a very crowded marketplace, to create an environment favourable for political and social stability, to

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<sup>54</sup> Yu Guoming 2008 "The Three Values of News: Openness, Timeliness and Balance – a Reflection on the Build-up of Media Value in National Emergency Response Mechanism in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 26 – 29; Shao Peiren and Pan Xianghui 2008 "The Inherent Linkage between Crises and Media System Innovation Reviewed from the Wenchuan Earthquake," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 116 – 125. 124

<sup>55</sup> Chen Lidan 2008 "New Thinking Brought by the Wenchuan Earthquake Report", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 164- 174.166

<sup>56</sup> Shao Peiren and Pan Xianghui, p. 124; Li Datong "The Establishment of Disaster Reporting's Core Value and Mature Mode", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 151 – 156. 154; Zhu Youjun and Niu Guangxia 2008 "A Study on the Humanization Process of Television Communication in the Respect of Live Broadcast of the Wenchuan Earthquake," in Li Datong "The Establishment of Disaster Reporting's Core Value and Mature Mode", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 205 – 214. 214

<sup>57</sup> Zhou Haiyan 2008 "The Beginning and Ending of News Power," in Li Datong "The Establishment of Disaster Reporting's Core Value and Mature Mode", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 215 – 225.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 221

<sup>59</sup> Han Lixin, Zhang Shikun and Wang Chunyu 2008 "Overlooking and Blending in – An analysis of the Key Words in China Central Television's 2008 Live Broadcast of the Wenchuan Earthquake," in Li Datong "The Establishment of Disaster Reporting's Core Value and Mature Mode", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 259 – 267. 261

construct a good image of the party-state, to harness popular support for the government, and to compete with transnational media corporations for the global flow of information. Because of the multi-faceted functions the media are expected to play, they are in a good position to negotiate and bargain with the authorities over the exercise of restraint under their control and regulation. The examination of the discourses reveals the creative, ingenuous and less confrontational nature of their negotiation with the state, as is reflected by the areas over which they negotiate with the state. The negotiable areas include the so-called "citizen's rights," which are not politically sensitive like human rights and do not threaten the CCP's legitimacy or the political system. The non-negotiable areas include the coverage of protests -- violent eruptions of frustration and ethnic problems -- especially in Tibet and Xinjiang, social issues and conflicts. In areas where they consider negotiable, they resort to various strategies, using different strands of discourses that are more likely to be taken up by the government, or make use of state needs to further their own commercial and professional impulses.

*Media construction of the party-state as a competent leader*

The Chinese government has long been attentive to its image in the eyes of domestic and foreign audiences, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in which China aspires to become a more important player in the international community. So it is on the argument for image construction by the media that the case for information openness is first built.<sup>60</sup> Media scholars and professionals alike highlight the fact that the state's image has been greatly enhanced thanks to the media's coverage of government rescue efforts immediately after the earthquake, especially following CCTV's live coverage. They argue that CCTV's live coverage opened a window into the workings of the powerful central leadership and the advantages of socialism that allowed the swift coordination of efforts by the Central Government, the army and the whole society, which would hardly be possible in Western countries.<sup>61</sup> They point out that instead of the negative

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<sup>60</sup> Gong Wenxiang 2008 "The Build-up of National Image: An Analysis Based on China Central Television's Report on the Sichuan Earthquake," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 64 – 70; Li Datong "The Establishment of Disaster Reporting's Core Value and Mature Mode", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 151 – 156; 156; Li Shiquan 2008 "Reviewing the Breakthroughs of CCTV's Live Broadcast of 'Relief and Rescue Unite as One' from the Perspective of the Changing Concept of Disaster Report in China," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 175 – 182; 180, Han Biao 2008 "Recording History and Creating History – Inspirations for the Future Brought by the Earthquake Report," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 388 – 393. 389

<sup>61</sup> Ba Xiaofang 2008 "The Degree of News on Disaster," *News Front*, No. 6 pp. 2-5; Zhao Huayong, 2008 "Respect Laws Governing News and Perfect Emergency Contingency System", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. I – X VI; Fang Hanqi 2008 "Live Broadcast of Disaster – A Milestone in China's History of Journalism," in Zhao Huayong, 2008 "Respect Laws Governing News and

coverage China had been getting since the beginning of the year 2008, the international community started to speak very highly of the government's practice of information transparency, thus creating an international environment conducive to the coming Olympics.<sup>62</sup> In fact, they argue that the Beijing Olympics Games' mission to demonstrate to the world a contemporary China was already achieved by the coverage of the rescue efforts.<sup>63</sup> If the rescue efforts by the government demonstrated the hard power of the country, then the media's coverage demonstrates its increasing soft power, it is argued.<sup>64</sup>

### *Media credibility in image construction*

Following the argument that the disaster coverage has resulted in a very favourable image of the party-state, they continue to argue that to be able to best construct the image of the party, it is important that Chinese media build up its credibility,<sup>65</sup> because the media's credibility and the image of the party rise or fall together. Unfortunately, they remind us, the initial silence and later positive coverage of the outbreak of SARS in 2003, the limited coverage or positive coverage only of the 3.14 Tibet Riot and of the Torch Relay overseas in 2008 have turned the domestic audience to other forms of media or overseas media. They warn that information control comes at a cost: it could turn natural disasters into a social crisis and a government credibility crisis, such as during the government's cover-up of the outbreak of SARS.<sup>66</sup> It was only through the live coverage of the earthquake that media, especially the TV sector, restored its

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Perfect Emergency Contingency System", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 1 – 6; Shi Tongyu 2008 "The Significance and Value of CCTV's Live Coverage of the Earthquake," *China Radio and TV Academic Journal*, No. 7, pp. 64 – 66.

<sup>62</sup> E.g., see VI, He Xiaolan "Unprecedented Earthquake, Unprecedented Live Coverage, and Unprecedented Reception Rate", *Journalists* 2008.06, 21-25.

<sup>63</sup> Li Shiquan 2008 "Reviewing the Breakthrough of CCTV' Live Broadcast of "Relief and Rescue Unite as One" from the Perspective of the Changing Concept of Disaster Report in China," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 175 – 182

<sup>64</sup> Luo Ming 2008 "When TV Encounters A Disaster" in in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. XI – XVIII; China Soft Power Project Team of the University of Beijing 2008 "Information Disclosure in the Earthquake Relief" in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 235 – 239.

<sup>65</sup> Gong Wenxiang 2008 "The Build-up of National Image: An Analysis Based on China Central Television's Report on the Sichuan Earthquake," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 64 – 70; Lu Di and Gao Fei 2008 "The Power of Media and Its Inspirations," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 87 – 91; Li Shiquan 2008 "Reviewing the Breakthrough of CCTV' Live Broadcast of "Relief and Rescue Unite as One" from the Perspective of the Changing Concept of Disaster Report in China," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 175 – 182; Shi Tongyu 2008 "The Significance and Value of CCTV's Live Coverage of the Earthquake," *China Radio and TV Academic Journal*, No. 7, pp. 64 – 66.

<sup>66</sup> Du Junfei 2008 "The Road to Openness: the Communication Legacy of the Wenchuan Earthquake," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 30 -38.

credibility to some extent, as was demonstrated by the return of the audience.<sup>67</sup> They argue that media restrictions not only reduce the trust of citizens in the Chinese media but also damage the image of the party-state. They go further to argue that if media policy allowed the mainstream media to report timely, openly and accurately on breaking news events, the credibility of both the government and the media would be greatly enhanced.

#### *Guidance of public opinion, domestic and international*

The guidance of public opinion has been an important political task entrusted by the state authorities to the media. It is therefore not surprising that they also build their argument on the important role media play in the guidance of public opinion, both domestically and internationally. With the world's largest number of cell phones and Internet users as of spring 2008, and with the increasing in-bound flow of overseas information,<sup>68</sup> China's media environment has been forever changed and is still changing. They therefore argue that if conventional media do not adapt their style and contents to the new media environment, they not only lose credibility but also fail to guide public opinion. In its competition with other forms of media and overseas media, CCTV, for instance, has lost to Phoenix in many instances, thus losing its leading position in the guidance of public opinion.<sup>69</sup> But for the coverage of the earthquake, they emphasise that state-owned media has won a big victory in the guidance of public opinion, which has never happened before.<sup>70</sup> State-owned media such as CCTV should have their voice in global events to convey accurately the wish of the party and government.<sup>71</sup> In following the progress of any important events, they could take the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 32; Lu Di and Gao Fei 2008 "The Power of Media and Its Inspirations," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 87 – 91.

<sup>68</sup> Yang Rui, 2008 "Transformation Complex of Chinese Media", paper presented at the conference "Post-Olympic China: Globalisation and Sustainable Development after Three Decades of Reform" 19-21 November 2008 School of Contemporary Chinese Studies, the University of Nottingham, UK.

<sup>69</sup> Gao Xin and Zhang Tao "China Central Station's Live Broadcast of the Wenchuan Earthquake from the Perspective of Crisis Communication" in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 135 – 142.

<sup>70</sup> Cheng Zhixia, Zhou He and Gao Yunhong, 2008 "Changes on the Internet Reflected on the Coverage of the Earthquake on May 15 on [people.com.cn](http://people.com.cn)", *News Front*, No. 6, pp. 7-8; Wang Xu 2008 "To Occupy the Commanding Ground of Public Opinion, in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 106 – 115; 107; Li Shiquan 2008 "Reviewing the Breakthroughs of CCTV's Live Broadcast of 'Relief and Rescue Unite as One' from the Perspective of the Changing Concept of Disaster Report in China," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 175 – 182; 180

<sup>71</sup> Han Biao 2008 "Recording History and Creating History – Inspirations for the Future Brought by the Earthquake Report," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 388 – 393. 388

lead in the guidance of public opinion to ensure the construction of a good image of the state. During the coverage of the earthquake, they stress, 23 domestic satellite channels merged with CCTV's News Channel, which, together with its website, became an important platform for the public to gather information.<sup>72</sup> They believe that information transparency has contributed greatly to national cohesion.<sup>73</sup> According to Zhao Huayong, public opinion on the Internet was first "rebellious, independent and irrational," especially those of young people born in the 1980s and 1990s. But state media successfully guided these opinions into supporting the party and government.<sup>74</sup> Internationally, they point out, 28 TV stations in 113 countries and regions used CCTV's footage. Many of them highlight the fact that CCTV, Xinhua News Agency and Sichuan TV became the primary sources of information for global media companies such as BBC and CNN,<sup>75</sup> thus turning construction of a positive image of the Party from "self-construction" to "construction by others" and "construction together."<sup>76</sup>

#### *Source of information for policy makers as well as for the public*

Scholars and professionals of media further argue that providing timely and accurate information serves two purposes: ensuring the "people's right to know" and helping policy makers to understand the situation and to make the right decisions.

First of all, they refer to the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress in 2007 as a historical moment when the "people's right to know" was reiterated.<sup>77</sup> They believe that the implementation of the "Government Transparent Regulation" in May 2008, especially the deletion of what was originally in the Regulations that "it is against the regulation to publicise

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<sup>72</sup> Liang Xiaotao 2008 "Record of History," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. XVI – XVIII. XVI

<sup>73</sup> Zheng Wenhua, Gao Dingbo and Yan Yue 2008 "Report for Life: Actively Guide International Public Opinion", *Overseas Communication*, No. 6, pp. 22-24.

<sup>74</sup> Zhao Huayong 2008 "Respect Laws Governing News and Perfect Emergency Contingency System", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. I – X. p. VIII,

<sup>75</sup> Zhou Xiaopu 2008 "The 2008 Dialectics" in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 7 – 16; Gong Wenxiang 2008 "The Build-up of National Image: An Analysis Based on China Central Television's Report on the Sichuan Earthquake," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 64 – 70 66

<sup>76</sup> Han Biao 2008 "Recording History and Creating History – Inspirations for the Future Brought by the Earthquake Report," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 388 – 393. 389

<sup>77</sup> China Soft Power Project Team of the University of Beijing 2008 "Information Disclosure in the Earthquake Relief" in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 235 – 239; 239 Zhao Huayong 2008 "Respect Laws Governing News and Perfect Emergency Contingency System", in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. I – X. p. VIII; VI, Zhang Junchang 2008 "Major Breakthrough and Reflections Brought by Reports on Catastrophic Emergencies," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 55- 63; 60, Lu Di and Gao Fei 2008 "The Power of Media and Its Inspirations," in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 87 – 91. 91

information without approval” under “Response to Breaking News Events” further laid the foundation for information openness politically and lawfully.

Secondly, they argue that an effective government needs accurate information. However, in the Chinese context there is always a paradox: leaders are aware that a clear understanding of public opinion improves their legitimacy, and yet at the same time their own censorship departments are manipulating or shutting out the public space for true public opinion. If this paradox is not resolved, the authorities will never really know what the public thinks, and will become an object of public ridicule again and again. Media scholars and professionals hope that the government will resolve the paradox of primary information and censorship. They argue that the live coverage of the earthquake proves that it not only satisfies the public’s right to know but also provides timely, accurate information and reliable evidence for policy-makers.<sup>78</sup> They believe that the media have proven their capacity to expand their functions from being the government’s tongue and throat to becoming “think tanks,” and to helping the government set the agenda.<sup>79</sup>

#### *Openness, trust and stability*

Some also base their arguments on utilitarian grounds. They reason that press freedom is not only a right but it is also conducive to political stability. They emphasize that information openness during the earthquake did not cause instability or turmoil.<sup>80</sup> On the contrary, “the media sent out the voice of the party and government and dispel panic among people”.<sup>81</sup> It promoted national cohesion and mutual understanding between the people and the government, and among different segments of society.<sup>82</sup>

More importantly, they also point out that the unusual performance of the media not only stemmed from its own improvement over the years, but also from the trust of the management department.<sup>83</sup> The media have shown that they should and can be trusted in times of crisis. Their performance proves that when allowed to speak, the media did not abuse the freedom; instead they were trustworthy, lawful, and self-disciplined.<sup>84</sup> They hope that enough has been learned from the coverage of the Tibet

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<sup>78</sup> Gong Wenxiang 2008 “The Build-up of National Image: An Analysis Based on China Central Television’s Report on the Sichuan Earthquake,” in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 64 – 70; 68, Lu Di and Gao Fei 2008 “The Power of Media and Its Inspirations,” in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Media Reflections*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 87 – 91.91; Bai Yansong, Wu Qiang 2008 “Love is like Waves that Never Recede” in Liang Xiaotao (ed.) *Convulsion: Fieldnotes from Media Workers*, China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House. Pp. 11 – 17.

<sup>79</sup> 122

<sup>80</sup> 32, 68

<sup>81</sup> Zhao Huayong *Media Reflections*, p. v.

<sup>82</sup> 237

<sup>83</sup> 90

<sup>84</sup> 68, 90

Riot, the Torch Relay and the earthquake, that the sky will not fall if the right to speak is allowed – which is most important for the Chinese media.<sup>85</sup> They hope that the party-state also realises the importance the media play during crises: CCTV’s timely, accurate, detailed and continuous reports have actually become part of the country’s contingency system through not only information transmission also mass mobilization and organisation.<sup>86</sup>

Media policy in China has, frequently and easily, swung between control and openness, entirely dependent on the authorities’ perception of its impact on political and social stability.<sup>87</sup> If the leadership perceives a situation as favourable for the “right” policy changes, it is likely to be cooperative and even supportive of any proposals for policy reform. On the other hand, if the leadership perceives a situation as undermining and threatening to the political power structure, it is likely to tighten control and even initiate a crackdown. Working inside the system, media professionals and scholars know the importance of the perception of the leaders. Therefore some warn against any extreme reaction from society to the information openness seen during the coverage of the earthquake, especially to the irrational behaviour of some netizens.<sup>88</sup> They are concerned that such reactions would only cause conservatives in the government to demand information control on fears of instability. They therefore call on the society to exercise self-restraint, and to guide and encourage the government when there are any signs of opening up.

#### *Towards a more relaxed media policy*

All these arguments lead to the conclusion that media policy should be more relaxed. They hope that the positive response to the coverage of the earthquake by the government as well as the public will provide a positive example for the government to practise media reform.<sup>89</sup> After all, they argue, timely and sufficient information is pivotal in the construction of a favourable image of the state.<sup>90</sup> In other words, there is a great connection between the international image of China and a transparent media, as is clearly illustrated by the coverage of the 3.14 Tibet protest.<sup>91</sup> Information transparency helps demonstrate a country’s confidence of its culture, value system,

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<sup>86</sup> VIII, cheng xiumin, speed, depth and width in the coverage of the Sichuan Earthquake”, *Overseas Communication*, 2008.06, 50-51

<sup>87</sup> Hu Zhengrong, 2005 “Towards the Public?: The Dilemma in Chinese Media Policy Change and its Influential Factors. Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy: Harvard University (2005), p. 3; Yongnian Zheng 2007 *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China*, Stanford University Press

<sup>88</sup> 238-9

<sup>89</sup> 37

<sup>90</sup> 78

<sup>91</sup> 237

development model, system and policies.<sup>92</sup> Media transformation has a great impact on the development of society, which also serves as a barometer of the society.<sup>93</sup> In other words, the media are as much a product of political changes as they are an influence on them.

Abundant discussions are found on the examined sites of to how the media should juggle their responsibilities to the state, the market, and the audience.<sup>94</sup> The most noticeable among them is the debate on whether and how freedom from politics would continue in the coverage of future crises. Some voice their doubts as to whether the government would continue to practise the same openness in future crises. Much delayed reports on the “hand, foot, mouth disease” in Fuyang, Anhui, meant that such doubts are not unfounded.<sup>95</sup> In addition to voicing their need for a press law to protect them from the party’s arbitrary power, most also believe that to achieve greater autonomy the establishment of a disaster coverage system is needed, without which the same kind of “independence” could not be repeated.<sup>96</sup> As many media policies are un-transparent, prone to change, and unpredictable, both media scholars and professionals are calling for more transparent policies. While the authorities may enjoy tremendous latitude in terms of how these ambiguous regulations could be defined and interpreted, the Chinese media often suffer from the uncertainty of their policies. For instance, they complain that when quoting from the “Regulation,” expressions such as “at an appropriate moment,” “among appropriate people,” and “under certain circumstances” are often added, making such policies ambiguous and difficult to interpret.<sup>97</sup> This uncertainty or ambiguity often leads the media to be either over-concerned or overcautious, which means a collective loss of voice.<sup>98</sup> They believe that the breakthrough in the coverage of the earthquake does not mean everything has transformed because the same social and political conditions remain.<sup>99</sup> It is only under unambiguous policies regarding the timing, tone, scale and form of coverage of a crisis can professionals perform their best.

### **Conclusion: Chinese media reform under negotiation**

Different dynamics such as openness, globalisation, marketisation and digitisation have been identified to contribute to the transformation of China. There are enough signs to show that the party-state is moving towards hegemonic rule, which requires a

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<sup>92</sup> 68, 237

<sup>93</sup> 61

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<sup>95</sup> 34, 124

<sup>96</sup> 181, *Journalists*, 2008.06, special issue on analysis on report on the ‘kang zhen jiu zai’

<sup>97</sup> 32

<sup>98</sup> 61, 207

<sup>99</sup> 61

combination of coercion and consensus, with the latter as the driving force in social and political relations.<sup>100</sup> As hegemony is based on leadership and consent, it must be seen to continually adapt to the organic demands of the people so that the state is able to maintain power with legitimacy. It must also involve political reform in order to lead morally and intellectually.

As part and parcel of China's unique and drastic transformation from a planned economy to a market economy over the past three decades, the media in China have also undergone dramatic changes introduced by commercialisation, globalisation and technological advances. These changes have empowered the media to negotiate with the state for more autonomy.

In the mid-1980s, economic reforms and the open-door policy introduced market logic to the state-owned media and led to a fledgling journalism reform movement and the emergence of discourse on democratization, which threatened to challenge the party's monopolistic control.<sup>101</sup> Since the 1989 crackdown, even though the media press reform has taken a sharp turn toward commercialization after the party's unreserved embrace of a market economy in 1992, the struggle for reform in the political realm has not been abandoned. As Zhao wrote more than ten years ago, "whenever there is a chance, press reform resurfaces as a political issue."<sup>102</sup> Indeed since the Regulations on Open Government Information took effect on May 1<sup>st</sup> 2008, Chinese media have taken to the topic of information openness in a big way. No sooner had the legislation taken effect than the media began questioning its inadequacies, particularly on how to ensure compliance by local governments, and how to standardize the information release process. In the aftermath of the earthquake, media professionals have been remarkably vocal in negotiating publicly with the state over the breadth of autonomy. After 32 days of live coverage, CCTV organised a symposium<sup>103</sup> inviting scholars and professionals to review Chinese media's coverage of the earthquake in general but with a focus on its own coverage. A book series was out within less than two months, and according to Brice Pedroletti (*Le Monde*, 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 2008)<sup>104</sup> there were more than 800 articles addressing "information openness" in China's press in June alone.

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<sup>100</sup> Yoko Harada 2008 "Hegemony, Japan, and the Victor's Memory of War" in Richard Howson and Kylie Smith *Hegemony: Studies in Consensus and Coercion*, London: Routledge. Pp. 219 – 236.

<sup>101</sup> Yuezhi Zhao, 1998 *Media, Market and Democracy in China: between the Party Line and the Bottom Line*. University of Illinois Press. P. 165.

<sup>102</sup> Yuezhi Zhao, 1998 *Media, Market and Democracy in China: between the Party Line and the Bottom Line*. University of Illinois Press. P. 165

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<sup>104</sup> *Quand La Chine Débloque*, at <http://chinedesblogs.blog.lemonde.fr/2008/07/03/emeutesdewengan20-quand-la-chine-supgrade/>, access on 30 March, 2009.

The significance of those discussions lies in their push for information openness in future coverage of breaking news events. In the lead up to the Olympic Games in Beijing, Chinese media scholars and professionals wanted to give the government a big push before the Olympic Games by trying to convince the government of the importance of providing transparent information.

However, there is a distinction between the push for media reform in the 1980s and the 2000s. From the late 1990s, rather than confronting the state for a speedy reform of media, media professionals and scholars have more often taken to negotiations with the state. In the process of negotiation and interaction, both the state and media try to maximise the benefits, and under the right conditions, both sides are empowered. Apparently media professionals understand that the best results from negotiation occur when their interests and the regime's interests coincide. The article has shown that in the process of negotiation and renegotiation with the state, media organisations have attempted to affect media policy by trying to establish common ground between the party and media.

While the lasting effects of the breakthrough in the coverage of the earthquake remain to be seen, there is little doubt that the media have used the very fact of the government's initial acquiescence and later encouragement to advance the discussion of the value of timely information sharing. They seized the opportunity to raise calls for unambiguous media policies in the name of satisfying the people's "right to know," better construction of the image of a responsible state in the international community, active guidance of public opinion and so on.<sup>105</sup> The earthquake opened up a new horizon for Chinese media, which will undoubtedly bring about positive changes to political communication in China and to Chinese politics. Whether the changes are minimal, incremental and superficial, or large-scale and significant, they have raised the general public's expectation of the media. It is not impossible the government will reverse its policy, but it will be at the cost of losing its credibility and the general public's trust.

There are reasons to be hopeful that transformation of communication in China is happening, albeit at a gradual pace. Firstly, caught between pressures from new media, commercialisation and globalisation, media workers are under greater pressure than ever to take on extra risks.

Secondly, the party and government's awareness of media's role in the construction of its image is increasing. It is, after all, political tolerance that makes it possible for the Chinese media to go off the orbit of the party. The examined sites and interviews both show that media professionals and scholars realise that as the party-

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<sup>105</sup> 252

state moves towards hegemonic rule, this is the best moment to negotiate with the state for more autonomy.

Finally, the controlled nature of the Chinese publishing industry would not have allowed opinions contradicting or even diverging from the official position to be published in a book series. China may continue to intimidate those who offend its sensibilities. But, its "repression isn't what it used to be, and dissidents now are often less afraid of the government than it is of them," as *The New York Times'* Nicholas Kristof (2008) says. Hegemony is not only coercion but also consent.