

Contradictions of Market Media in the Party's China:  
*Super Voice Girls* and Dismissing Newspaper Editors  
(Early Draft: Please do not cite without permission)

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Presented To:  
Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics

Indiana University, May 2006<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I will draw conclusions about China's increasingly commercial media by juxtaposing *Super Voice Girls*, China's television sensation of 2005 and the dismissal of a series of newspaper editors in late 2005 and early 2006. My intent is to illuminate contradictions in contemporary Chinese media. On the one hand, *Super Voice Girls* makes it seem as if Chinese media is successfully managing the transition to capitalism. With this series, Chinese media operatives appropriated a format that had succeeded elsewhere in global television markets, and made it China's own. Lots of people made lots of money and large audiences had lots of fun. To be sure, some intellectuals raised the disquieting possibility that the audience's enthusiastic embrace of voting to determine the winning *Super Voice Girl* was a sign that Chinese were ready and eager for democracy. But while the authorities had concerns about *Super Voice Girls*, they did not seem to find it subversive.

On the other hand, similar commercial structures have created incentives for *relatively* independent journalism that the authorities have found so threatening as to feel compelled to adopt coercive measures that have exposed them to criticism both on China's Internet and in many international media outlets. Here again the results are contradictory. The authorities are evidently more or less completely capable of managing

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to my research assistant, Wang Ke, whose unstinting hard work made this paper possible. I alone, however, am responsible for all interpretations.

commercial media. But, it would nonetheless appear that for them, newspapers and the Internet are a constant headache that requires continuous effort, and in result, they often feel forced to deploy measures that make them seem arbitrary and venal.

One of the main themes for this paper is the economics of contemporary Chinese media. The commercialization of Chinese media has been one of the main themes of Chinese media studies, notably in Yuezhi Zhao's *Media, Market, and Democracy in China* and Daniel Lynch's *After the Propaganda State*.<sup>2</sup> The broad picture that they and others paint is that the influence of markets and capital have undermined a system of ideology that was once the main source of political power. But they generally found that the authorities have managed to retain control despite this transformation. A subsequent body of scholarship studying the introduction of new media technologies, especially the Internet, has reached similar conclusions.<sup>3</sup>

This paper will update these findings by considering some recent developments. I cannot claim to have discovered new information that radically revises previous understandings. *Super Voice Girls* is not a sign that a democratic global culture is about to overwhelm China. The authorities' ability to dismiss newspaper editors more or less at will is evidence that they still have the upper hand. And yet the 'magic of markets' has introduced a note of dynamic instability to Chinese media. It is far too soon to conclude that nothing will ever change.

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<sup>2</sup> Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics and 'Thought Work' in Reformed China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999)..

<sup>3</sup> See for example Nina Hachigian, "The Internet and One-Party East Asian States" *Washington Quarterly* vol. 25 n. 3 (Summer, 2002) pp. 41-58 and Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor Boas, *Open Networks Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

### *Super Voice Girls*

The success of *Super Voice Girls* makes China very much a part of the global market in commercial culture. This television series offered the pleasing spectacle of young women competing to become a national 'pop idol.' The format – stretching from awful performances in early rounds to avid fan clubs in later rounds – is closely related to similar shows that have run in over forty countries worldwide. The enthusiastic response in China mirrors that of television audiences in other countries where similar shows had similarly high ratings. Whether or not, as many Chinese commentators argued, the audience choosing winners and losers by voting is a harbinger of democracy remains to be seen, but *Super Voice Girls* clearly marks a triumph of commercial culture over state propaganda, at least in its traditional form.

The format that eventually became *Super Voice Girls* is one of the global TV market's greatest successes ever, having been broadcast in over 50 markets worldwide. The first such show, *Pop Idol*, reached its first climax in the U.K. in February of 2002. It was produced by Simon Cowell, a leading figure in the British music industry and the firm, FremantleMedia, and broadcast on ITV. Cowell's new format was based on previous music shows such as *Popstars*, a format originated in New Zealand in 1999 and distributed by Screentime in which the audience chose among auditioning musicians to create a new band. The *Popstars* format was a great success with versions broadcast in many countries.<sup>4</sup> Cowell furthered this format to include in the early shows' auditions of truly awful performances followed by his harsh reviews and the eventual choice of a single musician rather than a band. His production was the show of the year in the U.K.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Screentime: Formats at <http://www.screentime.tv/>. Retrieved 15 May 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Carter, *Desperate Networks* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2006), see especially pp181-95.

Even so, Cowell and his partners had a hard time selling the show in the United States. They succeeded only when they obtained the support of Elizabeth Murdoch, Rupert Murdoch's daughter, who was familiar with the show because she was then running Rupert Murdoch's most important British firm, BSkyB and was aware of how successful the show had been in the U.K. She persuaded her father to intervene, and Murdoch in turn ordered Fox television's president, Peter Chernin, to buy the format.<sup>6</sup> The resulting show, *American Idol*, proved yet another confirmation of Murdoch's genius, as it won enormous ratings in the American market, which remains global television's most lucrative market. In a recent quarterly report *American Idol* was cited as the main reason that profits had doubled over the same quarter a year earlier, not just for the broadcaster, Fox Television, but for all of News Corp.<sup>7</sup>

Chinese television has come a long way to be capable of successfully producing this sort of show. At the time of Mao's death, Chinese television was more of a curiosity than a mass medium. Broadcasts were limited to a few hours a day in major cities and enjoyed reception in only a very few locations. But this meant that in contrast to cinema, which had been a major medium throughout the history of the Peoples Republic and which was embroiled in virtually every major campaign, television had less Leninist institutions and less political baggage. Post-Mao China proved fertile ground for the television industry. The shift toward light industry allowed for the production of television sets. Rising standards of living provided consumers eager to buy television receivers. It took only 17 years for urban China to be saturated with televisions. In 1980, only 0.4 percent of urban households had a television, but by 1997 there were more than

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "American Idol boosts News Corp profit" *Sydney Morning Herald* 11 May 2006. Retrieved from <http://www.smh.com.au> 11 May 2006

100 televisions per 100 households.<sup>8</sup> Production of television shows grew at a similar rate. In 2001 alone, Chinese produced nearly 3.5 million hours of television.<sup>9</sup>

The growth of the consumer economy also created an advertising industry willing to organize and pay for the production of commercial television. In Mao's China advertising had been condemned as the capitalist model for the media. What little advertising remained after the demise of privately owned media in the early 1950s disappeared at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. By most accounts, it was in January, 1979 that Shanghai TV broadcast the first advertisement – a plug for some wine – to appear in any Chinese media since the Cultural Revolution. Many more advertisements followed and television broadcasters were able to claim enormous revenues. For example, CCTV, the national network operated by the central government, generated nearly \$4.25 million dollars of revenue from one broadcast, the Chinese national soccer team's opening match in the 2002 World Cup.<sup>10</sup>

This growth would not have been possible without decentralization of state-owned television interests, the participation of private firms, and the growth of competitive markets. In 1978 Beijing Television was renamed China Central Television (CCTV) and became the national network. By 1980, officials determined that provinces would take the lead in developing television, and in 1983 established a four level system with county, city, provincial and national television interests with lower levels allowed to invest and hire personnel with relatively limited supervision from above. In 1985 television stations were granted the right to keep a portion of any profits they generated, and by 1992 were made responsible for their own profit and loss. While a national

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<sup>8</sup> *China Statistical Yearbook, 1998* (Beijing: China Statistical Publishing House, 1999). At the same time, over 90 percent of rural households had a television.

<sup>9</sup> *China Statistical Yearbook, 2002*

<sup>10</sup> See "China-Costa Rica Match *Earns* CCTV US\$6,000 Per Second in Ad Income," *China Online* [www.chinaonline.com] Accessed 6 June 2002.

Ministry of Radio and Television was organized in 1982, provinces already had a running start at autonomy. The critical success, in contrast to cinema where until recently films could not be distributed without approval from central authorities, was that provincial authorities could approve shows for broadcast, and that approval in one province was valid in others.<sup>11</sup> Starting with newspapers in 1996 and spreading to television and film in 1999, Chinese media firms were assembled into conglomerates or groups. While this provided for an increased degree of control from the top down, it also allowed for an increased degree of trans-regional and cross-media competition.

This institutional framework resulted in growth in more or less competitive markets. To be sure, there are serious limits to market competition. Despite the *relatively* convenient regulatory framework, there are still stiff regulations on what can be broadcast. This includes political restrictions, restrictions based on moral grounds, and also restrictions based on taste. Television stations' links to provincial authorities lead to restrictions on market entry and access. While privately owned firms are allowed to participate in the television industry, since all broadcasters are owned by provincial authorities, the private firms are almost always in the weaker position. This said, the growth in the television industry and the broadcasters' need to attract audiences has created a robust market for television programming. Some of this market has been met by private production firms. Advertising agencies were among the most important early pioneers, often putting together television shows and distributing them to television stations as a means of generating product that could be sold to advertisers. The demand for television programming has also been addressed through mergers with and consolidation in the movie industry which, for most of the 1990s, was in decline the

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<sup>11</sup> This history is accounted in greater detail in Liu Qing and Barrett McCormick, "Cinema and Television: Leninist Institutions, Commerce, and the Private Sphere" unpublished manuscript.

audience for domestic films shrank. While different participants may complain about unfair competition, such as private advertising firms that find television stations unreliable or television producers that find censors unpredictable, it remains that the ensemble of participants have collaborated to create a successful and growing industry that has generated enormous revenues.

Hunan Satellite TV, which broadcast *Super Voice Girls*, is one of the most successful provincial stations. Founded in 1997 under the ownership of the television and broadcast offices of the Hunan Provincial Government, the company enjoyed steady growth through 2000, and managed to win landing rights on the cable systems found in cities in every province in China. The broadcaster's success lured others to copy its formats and profits fell from 2000-2003. At that point Hunan Satellite Television changed strategies to emphasize entertainment. Programs like *Super Voice Girls* succeeded in reviving the firm's fortunes.

From the early 1980s on, Chinese television has also imported television from international sources. Already in 1980, *The Man From Atlantis*, which was terminated in the U.S. after a quick 13 shows in 1977, proved a sensation in China. Later imports, such as *Hunter* and various Latin American soap operas, would prove similarly popular. The American NBA has won enormous audiences from its broadcasts on Chinese TV. Foreign imports, though, face various political and economic restrictions.<sup>12</sup>

Chinese television has also imported formats. By and large television audiences everywhere prefer shows that are produced in local languages and to suit local cultures. Some television shows have won wide audiences in diverse cultures.<sup>13</sup> But it is common

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<sup>12</sup> For a history of the internationalization of Chinese television, see Junhao Hong, *The Internationalization of Television in China: The Evolution of Ideology, Society and Media Since the Reform* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

for shows that have been tremendously popular where they were made, such as *X Files* in the U.S., have been drawn much smaller audiences in other countries. Hollywood has made a practice of producing films that suit tastes in many markets, but whether cause or effect, television producers in the United States and other countries have been more oriented to domestic markets. Using a format developed elsewhere saves producer development and production costs, but nonetheless allows them to a local show with a local flavor.<sup>14</sup> Michael Keane reports that Chinese television has copied formats from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Europe, and the United States. He finds the result – such as the 2001 television series *Shangri-la* in which three teams of six people went on a thirty-day trek across the fringes of the Himalayas supplied with only ten-days of matches and food – to be lacking in creativity and quality.<sup>15</sup>

This brings us to the success of *Super Voice Girls* in China. The show had been broadcast on Hunan Satellite TV, a provincial station with national cable distribution, in 2004, but had not enjoyed exceptional ratings. It did, however, attract the attention of Sun Jun, a marketer working for Mongolian Cow, a firm that sells, among other products, Mongolian Cow Yogurt. Sun had been hired to triple sales of the already popular yogurt from 700 million to 2.5 billion *yuan* with the year. After unsuccessful attempts to make deals with various celebrities, Sun chanced upon the existing show. Aware of *American Idol's* success and seeing that young women were the main market for yogurt, Sun pitched the idea to his superiors. Once he overcame their initial resistance, he then worked to persuade Hunan Satellite TV that with an infusion of cash from the Mongolian Cow company, their show could find the same level of success it had

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<sup>14</sup> Albert Moran, *Copycat TV: Globalisation, Program Formats and Cultural Identity* (Luton, Bedfordshire: University of Luton Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Michael Keane, "As a Hundred Television Formats Bloom, a Thousand Television Stations Contend" *Journal of Contemporary China* v11 n30 (February, 2002) pp5-16. See also Christopher Bodeen, "China-Survivor" *Associated Press* 22 June 2001.

found in other international markets. When Hunan Satellite TV agreed, Sun went on to build an integrated marketing campaign that included not only the television show, but also advertisements on television, on the Internet, in print media and posters in grocery stores and at other points of sale. The *Super Voice Girls* logo was prominently displayed on Mongolian Cow Yogurt packaging. In the event, Sun's campaign proved a success. He exceeded his sales goals and Mongolian Cow Yogurt improved its standing in China's yogurt markets from the third to first place. Moreover, Mongolian Cow and Hunan Satellite TV were not the only firms that benefited. Others such as the telecommunications firms that handled the text messaging required for voting, the firms that produced the various advertisements, and the media firms such as Internet portals that carried the ads gained large revenues.<sup>16</sup>

*Super Voice Girls* clearly did succeed in adjusting the *Pop Idol* format to suit Chinese tastes. The broadcast remained true to the format. Consistent elements include awful performances in early rounds,<sup>17</sup> a panel of judges that comments on performances, brief presentations of training sessions designed to improve the contestants' skills, interviews and commentary that gave contestants personality and 'back story,' sympathetic endorsement of contestants' dream of a career as a 'pop idol,' and building dramatic tension over who would be voted off the show. But *Super Voice Girls* was carefully constructed as a Chinese show despite its international inspiration. It started with regional competitions distributed across an interesting selection of provincial cities, Guangzhou, Changsha, Zhengzhou, Hangzhou and Chengdu, and towards the end, included a vision of 'global China' in the form of groups Chinese fans of *Super Voice Girls* shouting encouragements in front of recognizable international settings such as the

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<sup>16</sup> 孙隽, *超级策划* (合肥: 安徽人民出版社, 2005)

<sup>17</sup> At this writing, a video clip of one such performance could be found at <http://news.wenxuecity.com/BBSView.php?SubID=news&MsgID=245231>.

Sydney Harbor. A systematic investigation of how *Super Voice Girls* differed from other *Pop Idol* series is beyond the scope of this paper, but preliminary investigation suggests that there were significant differences between this show and other versions such as *American Idol*. Perhaps the most important of these is that the Chinese show included only female contestants.<sup>18</sup> Also, since the Chinese show broadcasts to a single timezone, performances, voting, and contestant elimination in a single show, while the American version has one show for performance and voting and announces the results on another broadcast later in the week. Other differences are more subtle. The American version, for example, often manipulates contestants to produce backbiting and controversy while the Chinese version seemed more at pains to show the contestants to be mutually supportive and saddened that anyone has to leave. The Chinese show adopted vocabulary from Chinese video games, 'PK' for 'player kill,' and created a special 'PK stage' where contestants at risk of 'PK' were required to stand while at risk. The PK moment was the focus of considerable dramatic tension and, tuned to the women contestants and target audience, was tearful in a manner that American audiences might find excessively feminized. It is an interesting irony that many viewers and commentators found the eventual winner to be neither an especially good vocalist nor an especially beautiful woman, but was instead thought to be boyish. Her supporters responded that they appreciated that she dared to be herself.

The Chinese public was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. The series had higher average ratings than CCTV's news show, *Xinwen Lianbo* and Hunan Satellite TV was able to charge commensurate rates for advertising.<sup>19</sup> The final achieved the extraordinary distinction of coming close to or even overtaking CCTV's Spring Festival Gala, formerly

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<sup>18</sup> Other similar programs in China have been exclusively for male contestants, but have not been at all as successful.

<sup>19</sup> 王冰子, "2005湖南卫视超级女声节目的研究和启示"  
[<http://www.monetnet.com/moneditor/cs/subject/zwtx/mwgc/3462/10064.html>]

the most watched show on Chinese television. As with *American Idol*, fans attached themselves to individual contestants. As Ben Marcom and Jeremy Goldkorn explained, Super Voice Girl fans entered the Chinese lexicon:

'Fan' is sometimes rendered in Chinese as fen si (粉丝 — Chinese vermicelli). The fan group of each semi-finalist Super Voice Girl competitor were given their own names, with each name related to the word fen si:

Yu Mi (玉米 — corn): Li Yuchun's fans

Fen Bi (粉笔 — chalk): Zhou Bichang's fans

Liang Fen (凉粉 — bean jelly): Zhang Liangying's fans

He Fan (盒饭 — take-out food): He Jie's fans

Jia Mi: (佳迷 — Ji Minjia addiction) : Ji Minjia's fans

The fans have been crazily supporting their idols, arguing with each other and slandering their competitors. There have been scandalous stories about the competition's judges, allegations that Li Yuchun is a lesbian, and enough gossip online to keep *Super Voice Girls* at the top of Baidu's most popular search terms for weeks on end.<sup>20</sup>

Exactly what this means for Chinese politics and culture was the subject of an avid debate among leading intellectuals that was largely found on-line, but which also spilled over into some newspaper columns.<sup>21</sup> Some were skeptical of finding any benefit from commercial culture and noted that the choice of what entertainment to consume was hardly the same thing as democracy, and that democracy was discredited by the choice of a winner who did not sing all that well. Others charged that even then the Party had interfered with over the course of the show, alleging that a round of patriotic songs sung by the contestants at the end was the result of such intervention. Others, such as Xu Jilin, pointed out that the procedures used for selecting winners and losers were less than democratic as in early stages judges appointed by the sponsors were able to change outcomes and while the rules were changed for later stages to give power exclusively to the voting audience, the changes were made arbitrarily.<sup>22</sup> Many others, though, argued

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<sup>20</sup> Ben Marcom and Jeremy Goldkorn, "The final week of TV sensation Super Voice Girls" *Danwei* 24 August 2005 [retrieved from [www.danwei.org](http://www.danwei.org), 15 April 2006].

<sup>21</sup> A compendium of such commentary can be found in translation in the EastSouthWestNorth blog's "Super Girl and Democracy" at [http://zonaeuropa.com/20050829\\_1.htm](http://zonaeuropa.com/20050829_1.htm).

<sup>22</sup> 许纪霖, "戳穿'超女民主'的神话," [<http://211.157.100.62/viewthread.php?tid=20336>]

that *Super Voice Girls* had had a beneficial effect. Liu Qing argued that the show helped young people learn how to deal with success and failure in competition.<sup>23</sup> Liu Xiaobo argued that the show demonstrated that Chinese were capable of acting autonomously outside government authority, and could be very enthusiastic about democracy.<sup>24</sup>

Whether or not *Super Voice Girls* was or was not leading toward democracy, the show was of concern to the State Administration of Radio Film and Television who issued new regulations for this sort of show on the eve of the 2006 series. The regulations specified that future such shows should establish a healthy world view and good values, avoid vulgarity, maintain appropriate aesthetic standards for dress and appearance, and should be judged fairly. It also restricted who could broadcast such contests and mandated that any future such contests would remain under the state's watchful supervision.<sup>25</sup> While this caused a flurry of concern, Hunan Satellite TV has nonetheless begun another season of the show, and early reports indicated that it was achieving higher ratings than the year before.

While *Super Voice Girls* faced stiffer domestic regulation than some international counterparts, it was less regulated at an international level. Our best information is that Hunan Satellite TV did not obtain a license from the *Idol* format's international distributors.<sup>26</sup>

Regardless of these concerns, *Super Voice Girls* offered Chinese audiences an experience that approximated the experience of audiences in other countries watching

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<sup>23</sup> 刘擎,“超级女声与生活世界的成功神化”[原载2005年08月18日新京报] Retrieved from <http://www.cc.org.cn/newcc/browwenzhang.php?articleid=4618> 15 February 2006.

<sup>24</sup> 刘晓波,“超女粉丝的民间自组织意义” [[http://www.boxun.com/hero/liuxb/429\\_1.shtml](http://www.boxun.com/hero/liuxb/429_1.shtml)]

<sup>25</sup> 广电总局关于进一步加强广播电视播出机构参与、主办或播出全国性或跨省(区、市)赛事等活动管理的通知 [<http://www.law-lib.com>]

<sup>26</sup> “超级女声官司多多 英国人也来告湖南卫视和天娱” 商都新闻 26 November 2005 [Retrieved from [http://news.shangdu.com/category/11301/2005/11/26/2005-11-26\\_146512\\_11301.shtml](http://news.shangdu.com/category/11301/2005/11/26/2005-11-26_146512_11301.shtml) 16 May 2006]

similar shows. It is safe to say that concerns about licensing, regulation, and how advertising campaigns were organized and funded had much less visibility than the relative merits and personal struggles of each of the leading contestants. Very large numbers of people in many countries find the drama diverting and a pleasant topic to discuss with friends and colleagues. This does not mean that Chinese culture is converging toward an American norm. Instead I agree with Albert Moran that there is more to the trade in formats than cultural imperialism.<sup>27</sup> *Super Voice Girls* seems more like the complex flows and hybridization discussed by Arjun Appadurai.<sup>28</sup> The format, after all, can be traced to New Zealand and came to the United States via the U.K. But this is just to say that China's commercial popular culture is unique in the way that most countries' commercial popular culture is unique.

#### Newspaper Editors Dismissed

In China newspapers and the Internet present a public face that in many ways resembles *Super Voice Girls*. Most of the content most of the time consists of soft news and commercial entertainment. Internet users spend far more time searching for information on topics like *Super Voice Girls* than looking for the latest dissent from angry newspaper editors. The economics behind this fits a pattern roughly similar to that found in the television industry, with some adjustment for differing technologies, timing and institutional legacies. And yet in recent years, the use of coercive state power has been far more visible in newspapers and online than on television.

Over the last twenty years, commercial newspapers have gradually stolen the market from the Party's organ papers. At the outset of reforms, the most authoritative papers were the 'organ papers' published by territorial Party committees at each level of

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<sup>27</sup> Albert Moran, *Copycat TV*, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" *Public Culture* vol. 2 n. 2 (Spring, 1990) pp. 1-24.

government, with *People's Daily* at the apex, provincial papers such as Guangdong's *Southern Daily* or Shanghai's *Liberation Daily* in the middle, and a plethora of city papers at lower levels. These papers' leading role started to fade with the reintroduction of evening papers (the organ papers are typically morning papers) in the early years of reform. In contrast to the stale political news that the organ papers were required to print, evening papers such as *Beijing Evening News* and Shanghai's *Xinmin Wanbao* served up a softer fare including sports, fashion, home, personal advice, cultural news, useful information for urban residents and so forth. This sort of content struck a responsive chord that made these papers the most widely read papers in the country, and with the onset of advertising, generated large revenues for their publishers. This in turn sparked a virtuous cycle where more money meant that they could publish more pages which attracted more readers and in turn more money again from eager advertisers. While the evening papers will still required to print political news on their front pages, readers could skip past that to a diverse range of reports in the many inside pages. Meanwhile, the organ papers were required to print political news all the way through, which left them thinner, less able to attract readers, and less able to attract advertisers.

Those stuck with the burden of publishing organ papers found respite in publishing supplemental papers such as a weekend edition that could escape the content regulations imposed on the organ papers. One of the most successful such supplemental papers, *Southern Weekend*, was published by the same body that published the Guangzhou Provincial organ paper, *Southern Daily*. *Southern Weekend* made a name for itself by exposing scandals and publishing reports closer to the edge of what the authorities were willing to tolerate than other papers were willing to risk. This and a mix of advertisements and content oriented to an increasingly affluent white collar readership made *Southern Weekend* an enormous economic success, but has simultaneously left the paper perpetually vulnerable to official censure.

Beginning in the late 1990s, a new format, 'the metropolitan paper' became the dominant format. The leading example was the *Southern Metropolitan Paper*, another entry from Guangdong province, which like *Southern Weekend*, risked censure and won market-share. In terms of content and format, metropolitan papers resembled urban papers in other countries such as the *Washington Post* or *New York Times* and demonstrated that television was not the only medium that could learn from foreign formats. The consolidation of media groups made this a competitive category. In Beijing, for example, there are approximately 37 regional papers and 248 national papers. Of the regional papers, the leaders are *Beijing Evening News* (Beijing wanbao), *Beijing Youth News* (Beijing qingnian bao), *Beijing Times* (Jinghua shibao), and *Beijing Daily Messenger* (Beijing yule xinbao), and *Beijing News* (Xin jing bao) lead the regional papers in the Beijing market. Each of these has its own flavor and is linked to different interests. *Beijing Evening News* had the advantage of being first to the market and has long had the largest circulation among Beijing papers. *Beijing Youth News*, though, has acquired capital by listing shares in one of its subsidiaries on the Hong Kong market, carries somewhat edgier news, and has enjoyed larger advertising revenues than the others. The *Beijing Times* belongs to the *People's Daily* group, and the *Beijing Daily Messenger* is a cross-media venture funded by a media group based on film and television interests which features entertainment news. The most interesting of the lot may well be the *Beijing News*, which is a cross-regional venture published by a partnership by the once important but now lackluster *Guangming Ribao* and the dynamic and daring *Southern Metropolitan News*.

The commercialization of China's newspapers has created a limited space and financial incentives for critical journalism. Commercialization is not without critics. As noted above, a great deal of the content of commercial newspapers is soft news. Sensationalism is also relatively common, and has at times incited aggressively

nationalist passions. Unlicensed papers provide pornography. Corruption is a serious problem, with some newspaper reporters accepting payoffs for stories favorable to commercial interests. However, newspapers like *Southern Weekend*, *Southern Metropolitan News*, and *Beijing News* have developed a lucrative market for commentary more critical than that found in other papers. *Beijing News*, for example, exceeded expectations by becoming profitable within a year of its founding. While these papers are still owned by official organs, their owners have economic as well as political interests, and the complex tangle of China's economic and political institutions creates at least a limited and variable space for critical commentary. Moreover, these economic incentives are a structural feature of contemporary Chinese media markets, and are not eliminated by the application of sanctions against individual newspapers.

The rapid growth of China's Internet has had an important impact on newspapers. As the dramatic increase in numbers of Internet users is widely reported, the most important point to emphasize here is that China's Internet users remain a relatively small portion of China's population, and remain comparatively urban, well-educated, and upper income. Moreover, China's poverty and income disparities mean that it will take a longer for Internet users to match the general population than it has in wealthier countries. The nonetheless rapid growth of China's Internet can be attributed both to a supportive state and lively entrepreneurs. In contrast to earlier scholarship that depicted a zero-sum struggle between the state and a 'technology of liberation,' more recent scholarship has generally found that the state to have sought to promote and co-opt the Internet.<sup>29</sup> These efforts have included massive investments in communication infrastructure and efforts to keep Internet access affordable. China's Internet has also benefited from coming of age in the 1990s when the institutional environment was even

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<sup>29</sup> See for example Nina Hachigian, "The Internet and One-Party East Asian States" op. cit., and Kalathil and Boas, *Open Networks Closed Regimes*, op cit.

more open and market-oriented than that enjoyed by television in the 1980s. The result is that while strategic elements of China's Internet remain state-owned, there are also a dynamic cadre of entrepreneurs who have built private companies that draw on international finance and technologies.<sup>30</sup> In addition, international firms including Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, and others have been allowed a greater role in China's Internet than in any other Chinese media.

The Internet affects both the circulation of information in newspapers and the economics of newspapers. Chinese newspapers had enjoyed a steady growth in circulation that newspapers in Europe and the United States could only envy. In the last couple of years, though, Chinese newspapers have had to face trends familiar to their Western counterparts, namely the shift of younger readers and advertising dollars toward the Internet. Equally important, the Internet allows information to circulate in ways that change the boundaries of what can be published in newspapers. The Internet both makes more content available for newspapers to report and helps journalists to communicate with each other.

The intrinsic characteristics of newspaper and Internet technologies make these media more difficult to regulate than television. Television technology makes it the quintessential 'few to many' media. Print media and especially Internet allow for more senders to send more messages to more people at a lower cost than television. This coupled with the structural incentives for critical journalism described above have created a serious problem for Party media managers.

The authorities, of course, have an enormous and effective infrastructure for regulating media content. This system has its origins in and still bears the legacy of China's Leninist past when the authorities orchestrated virtually the whole of the public

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<sup>30</sup> David Sheff, *China Dawn: The Story of a Technology and Business Revolution* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2002).

sphere. Media regulation is multi-tiered and thorough. The authorities still organize campaigns offering financial and career incentives to those who will report selected issues the way they want them reported. There are still extensive ownership and licensing regulations that mean that most media properties, especially in print and broadcast media, are formally owned by the party or government organs. This means that political authorities generally have the ability to suspend publication or close a property. They also have the ability to transfer or fire editors and reporters. Open-ended laws restrict constitutional guaranties of freedom of speech. Many journalists report that local press and propaganda authorities put out a steady stream of directives with instructions on how some topics should be reported and banning reporting other topics altogether. Party authorities closely monitor the press and Internet to make sure that their injunctions are followed.<sup>31</sup>

Many special provisions apply to the Internet. ‘Firewalls’ mounted between the Chinese Internet and the global Internet block the retrieval of foreign web pages from specified addresses. Filters mounted at various places in the Internet interdict the flow of certain combinations of words regardless of their source. The authorities hire individuals to pose as ordinary Internet users and post messages to chatrooms and BBS that help to turn the flow of discourse in directions favored by the authorities. Internet users whether at home or in Internet cafes are required to register. Internet content providers are required to keep logs of who posted what and unless otherwise licensed, are restricted from doing their own reporting to create new content.

This thick layer of controls has contradictory results. On the one hand, this far exceeds what American journalists would call a ‘chilling effect.’ International monitoring

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<sup>31</sup> The best account of controls over Chinese media can be found in 何清涟, “中国政府如何控制媒体” 中国人权研究报告 2005. Retrieved from ChinaAffairs.org at <http://www.chinaaffairs.org> on 1 July 2005.

groups such as the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders are aware of only two or three dozen journalists and about 60 Internet users in detention or incarcerated.<sup>32</sup> This is more journalists detained than any other country, but still indicates that vast majority of journalists have chosen to avoid doing anything that would cause trouble with the authorities. On the other hand, this set of controls is not a self-regulating system.

Jiao Guobiao's 2004 criticism of the Propaganda Department is polemical but points out a fundamental contradiction in the Party's system of media management. A system that imposes secrecy and obscures pertinent ideas and points of view cannot be held to any meaningful standard of accountability or reliably incorporate rule of law.<sup>33</sup> Such a system is inevitably open to arbitrary abuse and manipulation. One website manager, for example, complains that it is difficult to predict exactly which postings will draw a response from the authorities that watch his website. Very often, he said, the problem was a local problem, such as a report regarding a specific locality that drew a response from the authorities in that locality who in turn were able to reach the authorities responsible for monitoring the website in question. Moreover, the interests protected by censorship could well be the personal interests of the leaders who complain rather than the public interest of the Party or government.<sup>34</sup>

The 'system's' limited commitment to rule of law can also be seen in the extraordinary measures taken to restrain those who are not otherwise submissive. For

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<sup>32</sup> Reporters Without Borders, *China - 2004 Annual Report*, [www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org), accessed 10 October 2004 and *Internet Under Surveillance 2004: China*, [www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org), accessed 9 August 2004; Committee to Protect Journalists, "China, Cuba, Two African Nations are Top Jailers of Journalists" 13 December 2005. Retrieved from [www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org) 28 March 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Jiao Guobiao, "Taofa Zhongxuanbu" (Declaration of the Campaign against The Central Propaganda Department) available in translation at *EastSouthWestNorth* (5 May 2004), <http://www.zonaeuropa.com/weblog.htm>, accessed 23 June 2004 and in the original language at *Guancha* (China Information Center, 9 April 2004), <http://www.guancha.org>, accessed 23 June 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Interview in Shanghai, January 2006.

example, Cheng Yizhong, the former editor of *Southern Metropolitan News*, established a reputation as a daring editor through, among other accomplishments, his role in reporting the case of Sun Zhigang, a student who in 2003 was beaten to death after being detained as a migrant without proper papers. While press coverage of this event instigated changes procedures for dealing with rural migrants in urban areas, not long thereafter Cheng was charged with improper use of his paper's funds and arrested. Many observers felt these charges were abusive.<sup>35</sup> Huang Jingao, a county executive who posted an Internet account of his attempts to root out corruption in which his superior were complicit, was subsequently reported to frequent prostitutes, wine and dine on an excessive scale, found guilty of embezzlement, and sentenced to life in prison following a trial whose procedures were open to question.<sup>36</sup> Journalists are also subject to threats of physical violence by those opposed to their reporting.<sup>37</sup>

The contradiction between a state possessed of a blunt and arbitrary means of control and a media with increasing space and incentives for critical reporting has been illuminated by the current leadership's evident intent to regain control. In the last several months there have been a series of incidents in which prominent journalists have been forced leave their posts or have had their publications suspended. In one such

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<sup>35</sup> "A Dismal Chapter in China's Media History" and "From Monitoring to Being Monitored: Northern Expedition Fails" Yazhou Zhoukan (Asia Weekly) 4 April 2004. Translated in and retrieved from *China Digital News* <http://journalism.berkeley.edu/projects/chinadn/en/> 6 July 2004. See also Edward Cody, "Arrest of Journalists Seen as Payback for A Bold Voice in China" *Washington Post* (4 April 2004) pA18. Retrieved from [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) 5 April 2004; and Arnold Zeitlin, "Provincial Politics and the Death of Free Media in China" *Jamestown Foundation China Brief* v4 n7 (1 April 2004). Retrieved from <http://www.-jamestown.org> 10 April 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Barrett McCormick, "Censorship and Accountability in Chinese Media" forthcoming in a volume to be edited by Hua Shiping and published by M.E. Sharpe.

<sup>37</sup> Sophie Beach, "In China, New Journalism, New Threats." In one such incident in 2005, Wu Xianghu, deputy editor of the *Taizhou Wanbao*, died following an assault by Taizhou traffic police who were embarrassed by an expose. "Newspaper Editor Dies After Police Beating" (6 February 2006). Retrieved from *Committee to Protect Journalists* [[www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org)] 28 March 2006.

incident, on 28 December 2005, *Beijing News*' editor-in-chief, Yang Bin, was forced to step down. Different reports identified reasons ranging from the personal ire of Central Propaganda Department Chief Liu Yunshan to displeasure over reports on the violent repression of villagers in Dingzhou to speculation that the Guangming Daily Group wanted more control of the increasingly profitable new paper.<sup>38</sup> What was unusual in this case was that following Yang's suspension, 100 of the paper's journalists went on strike and only returned when two assistant editors who had originally been dismissed along with Yang were allowed to return.

On 24 January 2006, the authorities suspended publication of *Freezing Point*, a weekly magazine supplement to *China Youth Daily*. The supplement had been created in 1994 and offered a steady stream of thoughtful commentary on politics, culture, and other topics. The editor, Li Datong, estimated that 40 percent of *China Youth Daily*'s subscribers only subscribed because of *Freezing Point*.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Li and his deputy Lu Yuegang have histories such that their superiors must have known what sort of paper they would edit. Li had been a leader of dissenting journalists in 1989, and an article written by Lu had been one of the reasons for dismissing an editor-in-chief at *Southern Weekend* some years before. Li had circulated a criticism of the management of *China Youth Daily* earlier in 2005, and had not only seemed to escape sanction at that time, but seemed to have induced the management to retract a bonus scheme that Li had charged would lead to flaccid journalism.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Congressional-Executive Commission on China, "Chinese Authorities Crack Down on Progressive Newspaper Publisher" 3 January 2006. Retrieved from *Congressional-Executive Commission on China* [www.cecc.gov] 3 February 2006 and Reporters Without Borders, "Restless Journalists at Beijing News Kept under Close Surveillance," 3 January 2006. Retrieved from *Reporters Without Borders* [www.rsf.org] 3 February 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Mark Magnier, "In China, Free Speech Shows Its Teeth" *Los Angeles Times* 17 February 2006 [Retrieved from www.latimes.com 18 February 2006].

<sup>40</sup> Christine Kwok, "China: Freedom row at China Youth Daily" *South China Morning Post* 16 August 2005. Retrieved from AsiaMedia at

The article that evidently triggered the crackdown was an historical piece by Yuan Weishi which charged the histories taught in Chinese textbooks with dangerous distortions that inflame nationalist passions. Li and Lu also reported that the authorities were critical of an article posted to the paper's intranet by Lu complaining that Liu Binyan – regarded by many as China's greatest investigative journalist, a reporter at *China Youth Daily* prior to falling victim to the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957 and recently deceased in exile – should not be erased from contemporary media history. Li was skeptical that the historical article was really the problem, telling a foreign journalist that “That’s just an excuse, they needed an excuse to close me down, and they chose that particular topic, history, because that’s an area they can easily manipulate public opinion on.”<sup>41</sup> Li and Lu were transferred to a think tank and the supplement resumed publication under another editor, but Li and Lu refused to go quietly. Instead they wrote a letter of appeal to Party authorities, gave angry interviews to the international media, and circulated statements on the Internet.<sup>42</sup> While Li and Lu proved at least temporarily beyond rescue, a group of 13 prominent intellectuals signed an open letter to the Party Central Committee citing, among other things, the Chinese Constitution's guaranty of free speech.

At about the same time, Chen Jieren was demoted from his position as editor of a smaller paper, *Public Interest Times*. Although officials stated that the actual reason for his demotion was incompetence, Chen issued a public statement claiming that the reason

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<http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=28286> 20 September 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Philip J. Cunningham, “Li Datong Meets the Press” *Danwei* 24 February 2006. Retrieved from [http://www.danwei.org/media\\_and\\_advertising/li\\_datong\\_meets\\_the\\_press\\_by\\_p.php](http://www.danwei.org/media_and_advertising/li_datong_meets_the_press_by_p.php) 26 February 2006.

<sup>42</sup> A translation of Li and Lu's statement, a link to the original, and the text of the memo announcing their dismissal can be found at “The Li-Lu Statement On Freezing Point ” *EastWestSouthNorth*. Retrieved from [http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060218\\_2.htm](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060218_2.htm) 10 May 2006.

was a series of critical articles including one that criticized a locality for pocketing disaster relief money meant to be distributed to victims and capped by an interview with an English professor claiming that an English language website maintained by the Ministry of Civil Affairs had numerous errors in translation and grammar.<sup>43</sup> Chen's statement, titled "Despicable Intrigue, Ridiculous Game" described Chen's superiors as scrambling to retreat from even the slightest hint of controversy for fear of arousing the ire of high level leaders at the Ministry of Civil Affairs and elsewhere who were far more interested in personal prestige and avoiding trouble than correcting mistakes or protecting the public welfare.

The contradictory results of the commercialization of Chinese media and the legacy of Leninist controls is that on the one hand, the authorities have retained the ability to intervene almost anywhere in the media at will. They can and do suspend publications, dismiss journalists, and from time to time, arrest, slander, and beat those who challenge their authority. On the other hand, commercialization has created structures that at least so far, have continued to generate incentives and opportunities for journalists who would challenge official interpretations. Some individuals, like Li Datong and Lu Yuegang, take great personal risks but have somehow survived calamities to do similar work in other settings. Moreover, the rise of the Internet means that they and others like them have the opportunity to tell their side of the story. Repression remains effective, but is more visible and open to public challenge than at any time since 1989.

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<sup>43</sup> Chen's statement can be found at 陈杰人, "无聊的游戏 卑劣的伎俩——就本人被解除《公益时报》主编职务并遭总编辑刘佑平恶意中伤事件告天下书" *Academic Criticism* 10 February 2006. Retrieved from <http://www.acriticism.com/article.asp?Newsid=7619&type=1001> 15 April 2006. The ostensibly offending article can be found at: 黄卫峰: 对外宣传工作任重而道远——评"中国政府网"英文网页中的表达问题[学术批评网创办五周年纪念征文]" *Academic Criticism*. 2 February 2006. Retrieved from <http://www.acriticism.com/article.asp?Newsid=7566&type=1000> on 15 April 2006.

## Conclusion

David Mindich's recent book, *Tuned Out*, offers an alarming account of how little interest Americans under 30 have in news and current events and the threat this poses to democracy. Mindich's book starts with a comparison of *American Idol* and the 2000 Presidential elections. Mindich reports that more people watched *American Idol's* conclusion than the second Presidential debate, and that young Americans in particular generally had far more information about the *Idol* contestants than about even leading candidates in the Presidential primaries.<sup>44</sup> Echoing themes found in Neal Postman's earlier work, Mindich argues that the triumph of commercial entertainment over reasoned debate poses a serious threat to American democracy.<sup>45</sup>

This serves as a reasonable caution about the impact of global commodity culture on China, regardless of whether it is pirated or purchased. We would do well to remind ourselves that multinational firms in general dealing in Chinese media have had a questionable impact. Rupert Murdoch (who was presumably disappointed when Hunan Satellite TV, with whom he had formerly partnered pirated the *Idol* format that his network had paid for) and his News Corporation has invested large sums in the Phoenix television network, but has yet to gain anything approaching full market access and has learned to carefully watch what his firms' products say about China, both inside China and overseas.<sup>46</sup> Global technology firms such as Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, and Cisco have generally accommodated themselves to China's existing system or have sold useful in the maintenance of repression.

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<sup>44</sup> David T.Z. Mindich, *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985).

<sup>46</sup> Michael Curtin, "Murdoch's Dilemma, or 'What's the Price of TV in China?'" *Media, Culture and Society* vol. 27 n. 2 (2005) pp. 155-75.

*Super Voice Girls*, though, does represent a dynamic situation. It is useful to consider the way this show constructs China. The choice of cities for regional finals – Guangzhou, Changsha, Zhengzhou, Hangzhou and Chengdu – and citing the finals in Changsha suggests a different map of China than is usually projected from Beijing. That the *Super Voice Girl* finals drew a larger audience than CCTV's *Spring Festival Gala* suggests that at least in the realm of popular imagination, Beijing is not always dominant. It is at least worth noting that in this popularly imagined China, the big decisions are made by voting. The metropolitan newspapers' rise over the organ papers represents a similar displacement. Popular culture is driven by markets and unpredictable tastes, and in the same way that Hollywood cannot predict which movies will be hits, by now Chinese authorities can never know what will be the next big thing.<sup>47</sup>

The Party's current crackdown – some say that Hu Jintao was personally involved in the censure of the *Freezing Point* editors<sup>48</sup> – indicates a level frustration and concern with this unpredictable force that outside observers do not always appreciate. In contrast to those who find that the authorities have successfully transformed their system of media management to accommodate and co-opt markets and new technologies, I believe that the authorities are so desperate to remain in control that they apply rough tactics that compromise their longer term interests.

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<sup>47</sup> In predicting popular culture, is useful to be mindful of screenwriter William Goldman's injunction that 'Nobody knows anything.' See William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1983).

<sup>48</sup> Geremie R. Barmé, "A Year of Some Significance" *The Australian Financial Review*, 31 March 2006.