

**Significant Changes in the Chinese Television Industry  
and Their Impact in the PRC: An Insider's Perspective**

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## **Introduction**

The television services of China have undergone dramatic changes since the policy of open door economic reform was introduced in the late 1970s. Few research studies, however, have been conducted in the United States and other Western countries on what, specifically, these changes are, and how they affect the lives of Chinese people and shape the media's role in Chinese society. This paper will outline the significant structural changes in the Chinese television industry, particularly at China Central Television (CCTV); it will also analyse the phenomenon of a highly popular program, 'Focus', (*Jiao Dian Fang Tan*) and its impact on Chinese politics and society. Based on this analysis, this paper will discuss relevant issues surrounding mainland Chinese media, including its editorial freedom and independence, expanding impact on policymaking, and, finally, its future role in the continued liberalization and democratization of China.

In recent years, the development of a market economy in China, and especially within the Chinese television system itself, has led to keen competition across and within networks—both to enhance their reputations and win greater audiences. In the process, Chinese television has gained much more freedom and independence. It is able, to some extent, to pursue its own professional goals and interests while at the same time serving its audience.

### **I. Chinese Television Industry in an Era of Change**

China's television industry has undergone drastic changes as the market economy deepens. Competition for advertising revenue and ratings has become a stimulus for television operators to improve their broadcasts and cater to the desires of the general public. In doing so, they have been able to build up an image of greater editorial independence and professionalism, while at the same time serving the interests of the people.

Unlike television industries in Western countries, there are only two national television networks—CCTV and China Educational Television—in China. In addition, there are more than 368 provincial and local television stations around the country. These stations

are not affiliated with the two national networks, but they are the only provincial stations that are allowed to provide local news for the CCTV network. With eleven channels, CCTV and all local television stations throughout the country currently reach 92 percent of the total Chinese population, representing a potential audience of no less than 1.19 billion.<sup>2</sup> In 2000, cable television reached an average of 85.3 percent of the population in ten major Chinese cities. Residents in these cities have access to as many as 38 TV channels.<sup>3</sup>

In theory, Chinese television is still under direct government control, and should act as a government mouthpiece. However, in practice, China's transition from a planned to a market economy has forced the television system to reform in fundamental ways.

### *New Sources of Income*

The largest source of funding for Chinese television has changed from government subsidy to commercial revenue. As government funding for television is less abundant, TV channels are forced to raise income on their own, and, consequently, they rely mainly on advertising revenue and sponsorship. From the mid-1990s, CCTV has become almost totally dependent on commercial revenues. In 2000, CCTV was able to raise 5.5 billion yuan from private sources (RMB) (US \$662.65 million) while the government contribution was a mere 30 million yuan (US \$3.61 million). Indeed CCTV pays more in taxes and for philanthropic efforts than it receives in funding from the government.<sup>4</sup> Today government sources supply only 0.5% of total CCTV funds.

Recently, the main source of funding for all media in China has come from advertising. On January 28, 1979, the state-owned Shanghai TV station aired the very first “commercial” broadcast in China. Soon thereafter CCTV also started to broadcast commercials on its national channel. On April 17, 1979, the country’s main national newspaper, the *People's Daily*, began to carry commercial advertisements, indicating official government approval of advertising as a way to stimulate China's economic development. The development of commercial ads was given a major boost in 1993 when CCTV launched

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<sup>2</sup> China’s population totalled 1.295 billion as of the end of 1999, according to official census results report by *Xinhua News Agency* on March 29, 2001. China Daily percentage data from “China Witnesses Rapid Media Development,” *Chinese News Release*, October 18, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Data from AC Nielsen survey “China’s Cable TV Coverage Increasing,” *Xinhua News Agency*, October 31, 2000.

the program 'Oriental Horizon' (*Dong Fang Shi Kong*). It was the first daily TV magazine program on social issues. It was so popular that the ads poured in and the program was described as a "special economic zone" in the TV industry. It also set the trend for television stations becoming responsible for their own losses and profits.

### *New Systems for Media Staffing*

In a related development, staff employment at CCTV has been dramatically transformed from the "iron rice bowl" system to a performance-based system.<sup>5</sup> Previously, most program staff members were appointed to established posts. Under the tenure system, their jobs were safe and salary guaranteed. Today the "iron rice bowl" is gone, and the majority of lower- and middle-range staff members are employed on short-term contracts. Their income is primarily pegged to the quantity and quality of their output. For example, a CCTV reporter has to produce two new items each month at level A (broadcast on main evening news), two items at level B (the second main news slot), and two at level C (outside prime time). If the reporter fails to meet the quotas over several months, he or she will lose their job. As a result, there is fierce competition among reporters to produce the best stories or features.

The development of Chinese television in a market-oriented economy has given rise to a new breed of journalist. Many television staff members are very knowledgeable about modern media techniques. Some of them have learned from and emulated Western media styles and work methods, and rejected traditional conservative approaches. These journalists have become highly professional in their program making and independent in their thinking in order to achieve their own goals and create new standards. The entire television system has made great efforts to catch up with more advanced foreign media outlets by buying new equipment, transmitting live news programs, and promoting a wider range of current affairs programming.

### *Battle for Ratings*

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<sup>4</sup> CCTV donates heavily to many charitable programs in China, such as "Hope Projects" (*xiwang gongcheng*), and other fundraising efforts, which are often state sponsored or sanctioned.

<sup>5</sup> "Iron rice bowl" (*tiefanwan*) is the Chinese euphemism for lifetime employment, or "unbreakable" job security.

In addition to the battles for advertising revenue, the media compete at various levels.<sup>6</sup> There is competition among TV, radio, and printed media. There is also competition between TV stations, channels, and programs. Journalists compete for exclusive news sources and prime time slots for their own programs. Many local TV stations have also been able to compete for audiences with the national network by transmitting their broadcasts via satellite or cable network to big cities. Audiences in turn have benefited from more choices. In order to gain an edge over competitors, TV stations must constantly review programming strategy to strike a balance between professional standards and high-quality programs.

Consequently, while audience ratings were never especially important in the past, they have recently become the dominant factor for TV programming decisions. CCTV regularly reviews the ratings for each channel and program. If any program transmitted in prime time fails to reach certain ratings level, it will be removed and rescheduled to the “graveyard” (“graveyard” refers to late evening, after midnight, or during daytime). The competition for ratings does not mean the end of government supervision, however. TV stations must also satisfy government demands; the media must steer a middle course between political and economic pressures. This is the only way to survive in a society that is both economically competitive and politically directed.

### *News Output*

The booming market economy in China has forced TV stations to recognize the importance of serving the people and providing them with useful information. This explains the blossoming of programs that provide social and economic information such as stock prices, traffic updates, weather forecasts, and farm prices. Furthermore, TV reporters are increasingly aggressive in reporting breaking stories that capture audience attention. A large percentage of CCTV coverage is dedicated to live breaking news, investigative reporting, and major issues and crises—such as satellite launches, the ground breaking of the Three Gorges Dam Project, the nuclear tests in India and Pakistan, the Iraqi crisis, the Kosovo War, and the

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<sup>6</sup> China’s primary source of Television ratings data is CVSC-SOFRES MEDIA (CSM) and AC Nielsen. CVSC-SOFRES MEDIA (CSM) provides rating data every day of the year for about 700 channels in 12 provinces and some 60 cities throughout China. The ratings are obtained from a representative sample of 11900 households, using diary and people-meter methods. AC Nielsen provides data for some big cities in China.

collapse of the Soviet Union. Consequently, coverage of international affairs and Sino-foreign relations continues to be of interest and importance. International issues are thoroughly covered on general news programs. CCTV has even sent TV crews to the Middle East to cover the Iraqi crisis and Middle East conflicts and another to Belgrade to report on events in Yugoslavia. This coverage received very high ratings. The smaller, local television stations in Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Guangzhou all broadcast their own international coverage even though production costs are very high.

The pace of change is striking. As the Beijing bureau chief for *Time* magazine, Jamie A. Florcruz has commented:

Continual market reform over the past decade has eroded the dominant position of the official media, as they have become increasingly open and responsive to public demand. To the people in China, the press and broadcasts are now a real source of information and food for thought, rather than a skimpy compendium of sterile polemic and abstruse dogma. The vibrancy, diversity and enterprise of newspapers, magazines and television shows reflect growing pluralism -- and Beijing's inability to control it.<sup>7</sup>

As China has become more open to outside influence, TV professionals have been allowed to adopt practices found in Western media. Producers have analyzed foreign television broadcasts in great detail and emulated some US programs. For example, 'Oriental Horizon', broadcast on CCTV 1, is a Chinese version of '60 Minutes', a popular U.S. current affairs series. The program 'Tell It Like It Is', (*Shi Hua Shi Shuo*) on CCTV 1, has a talk show format similar to the 'The Oprah Winfrey Show'.

## **II. Appearance Of The 'Focus' Phenomenon And Its Impact**

### *Origins of the 'Focus' Saga*

One of the most famous stories of the 13-minute-long program 'Focus', which is broadcast on CCTV 1 every evening after the main news, was shown on November 12, 1998. It gave an account of how Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji was duped six months earlier when he visited a state-owned grain barn in Nanling county, Anhui Province. Accompanied by a fleet

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<sup>7</sup> James A. Florcruz, "Chinese Media in Flux." *Media Studies Journal*, Winter 1999, pp.42-46.

of local and provincial officials and central government officials, Mr. Zhu was so impressed by the sacks of grain stacked from floor to ceiling in the barn that he lavished praise on the local officials. A CCTV network news program first reported his visit. But later, a ‘Focus’ investigation revealed startling news that the bumper harvest was artificially created. Local cadres had borrowed grain from other areas specifically for Premier Zhu’s visit in order to impress him. After the Premier left, so did the grain; it was returned to the lenders. The reports shocked viewers and triggered a nation-wide storm of criticism against the local officials.

‘Focus’ was created following an attempt by CCTV to test whether the government and public were truly prepared to accept similar exposures of corruption. The show’s predecessor was a daily morning program that began broadcasting on May 1, 1993, called ‘Oriental Horizon’. It had a smaller audience, but it marked the first time that television in China openly criticised bureaucracy, corruption, pollution, and other social problems. This significant shift received extremely favorable feedback from both the government and audience. After an eight-month trial period, CCTV started an evening program entitled ‘Focus’ on April 1, 1994, with even more frequent and pointed exposure of wrongdoing and corruption. Most officials and viewers warmly welcomed the program. As Elizabeth Rosenthal, correspondent for *The New York Times* observed:

Every evening at 7:38 more than 300 million people tune in to the 15-minute program whose hard-hitting investigations and interviews show just how far the Chinese media have come since the days when they provided little more than Communist Party dogma.<sup>8</sup>

The program symbolizes an attempt to test public opinion and the receptivity of the government to criticism in a more open society and in a more economically competitive environment. It shows that the media can act as more than just a government mouthpiece and can play a role, albeit a limited one, in matters such as the fight against corruption. The ‘Focus’ program closely mirrors the style of the U.S. television news shows ‘60 minutes’ and ‘20/20’. Its daily average rating is between 20 percent to 25 percent of the total potential audience, representing about 200 to 250 million viewers. As ‘Focus’ on CCTV 1 gained popularity throughout the country, almost every provincial and local television station has

started its own investigative news program based on the ‘Focus’ format. Soon other media—radio stations, newspapers and magazines—started to report investigations and revelations of corruption. Exposés of wrongdoing have become common throughout the Chinese media.

Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji noted this significant change, saying, “The ‘Focus’ phenomenon, emerging throughout the entire country, is an excellent innovation.”<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, when he visited the ‘Focus’ studio at CCTV on October 7, 1998, he expressed his full support of the program.

In unmasking problems within [the] government ‘Focus’ has represented the public interest and given ordinary people hope and confidence. I am also one of the officials who should be monitored by the ‘Focus.’ If I were to do something wrong, I would be criticised by your program.<sup>10</sup>

Li Peng, Chairman of the National People’s Congress, visited CCTV, and highly praised its watchdog role. Vice President Hu Jintao said that he too had been a faithful viewer of the ‘Focus’ program. This reaction of top leaders demonstrates the government’s open-mindedness and confidence.

### *Case Studies*

Through its popularity, ‘Focus’ is a powerful force for the people to air their grievances, and uncover corruption. This new power is illustrated by several examples of corruption exposed by Chinese television.

On April 4, 1997, ‘Focus’ carried the story that some pupils and middle school students in Heze, Shandong Province were seriously ill after taking “Iodoform and calcium supplements.” These nutritional supplements did not meet quality standards. Shortly after the TV transmission, President Jiang Zemin contacted the Public Health Minister, asking him to provide emergency treatment for the students in Shandong. The next day, the Ministry of Public Health along with the Ministry of Education and the Shandong provincial government took immediate measures to care for the students. As a result, the students recovered and all “Iodoform and calcium supplements” were sealed and confiscated for examination.

Remaining supplies were withdrawn from sale. The authorities called an emergency meeting

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<sup>8</sup> Elisabeth Rosenthal, “A Muckraking Program Draws 300 Million Daily,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> *Zhongyang Dianshitai Nianjian* [China Central Television Yearbook], (1999) pp. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 2.



to implement a strict examination of all nutritional supplements and to ban fraudulent products.

On November 25, 1997, 'Focus' aired a show criticizing toll takers on the state highway between the cities of Licheng and Lucheng. They had been illegally overcharging drivers. After the program's transmission, Luo Gan, a state councillor, telephoned the Ministry of Public Security and asked them to intervene and implement strict punishment. The Ministry of Public Security and the Shanxi provincial government sent crews to investigate the problem the very next day. Consequently, the 'Focus' story was repeated on the Shanxi provincial TV network for the next three days to ensure that anyone involved in the scandal would be disciplined and to warn others against similar wrongdoings. The Ministry of Public Security made an announcement that all tollbooth operators must abide strictly by the rules and cannot overcharge the public for their own profit. As a result, more than ten of those involved were given serious punishments.

On December 7, 1997, 'Focus' reported that farmers in Wudalianchi, Heilongjiang Province, had sold their grain to a local government grain store. However, for several months, they could not get cash for the sale, only an IOU. The managers of a government silo diverted the money to construct a factory to bottle spring water. The local grain farmers were very angry, and the TV program provided lively coverage of the farmers' complaints and demands. Afterwards, the Heilongjiang government sent a crew to Wudalianchi, probed the situation, punished the people involved, and returned the farmers' money within a few days. The farmers were thrilled. People in the countryside reported that farmers started to warn the local bureaucrats, "If you don't do the right thing, we will see you on 'Focus.'" The Heilongjiang government uncovered and sorted out a number of similar cases to good effect.

These cases show how the public is beginning to see the media as a way to voice their views and demands. On the other hand, some bureaucrats have become very nervous about 'Focus', and tried to stop it. There is a saying among some bureaucrats: "Avoid fires, avoid theft, avoid 'Focus.'" A story has developed which further illustrates the impact of 'Focus' in China. In this story, two lines of people are queuing up at the reception area of CCTV. One line is filled with those who want 'Focus' to send a TV crew to cover a story about social problems like pollution and corruption in their town or village. Another line is full of people

who hope to keep a story about them from being aired on 'Focus' for fear of bad publicity. They arrive at CCTV to admit to a certain wrongdoing and promise not to do it again. Some of them say they would prefer to pay compensation to victims rather than have their story told on the air. This story may be an exaggeration, but it does suggest the influence of the program. Furthermore, the program receives hundreds of letters, emails, and telephone calls from audience members every day with tips for stories that the 'Focus' program might want to investigate.

### *Shaping Policies*

The 'Focus' phenomenon has not only kept the government and the public informed of various problems, but sometimes it has helped set the government agenda for policymaking and reform. In May 2000, when President Jiang Zemin came back from his trip to the Middle East, a videotape copy of a 'Focus' program broadcast two days before was waiting in his office. It was entitled "How far away is the desert from Beijing?" and explored why some areas around Beijing were at high risk of desertification. Just recently Beijing had been hit by several sandstorms. Premier Zhu Rongji had watched the program and requested a copy for President Jiang. A few days later, the central government convened several meetings to discuss ways to avoid the further encroachment of desert towards Beijing. They decided to allocate some 8 billion yuan (RMB) (about \$1 billion U.S.) within five years to plant trees and move factories causing air pollution away from Beijing and its suburbs.

Another item involving ecological coverage occurred on December 26, 1996, when 'Focus' discovered that most of the forest planted as a windbreak against desert sand encroachment around the Bao-Lan railway had been illegally cut down. This not only worsened the surrounding environment but was also a major threat to the Bao-Lan railway—a main transport artery across Northwestern China. The Chinese government had spent enormous sums of money planting trees at this location over the previous twenty years and had established many areas of the forest as sand breaks around the Bao-Lan railway area. Authorities were shocked by the report and quickly introduced strict rules to stop the illegal felling of timber.

Yet another story on November 26, 2000, showed some farmers in Henan Province mingling garbage with newly harvested cotton as a makeweight when selling to the official cotton silo. The result was that the government factory had to hire more staff to clean the cotton and get rid of the garbage. That story, too, caught the attention of Premier Zhu and other officials as it took place at the height of the cotton harvest season. Therefore, the State Economic and Trade Commission called an emergency meeting and issued strict quality control regulations for the examination of the cotton crop.

In the period between June and July 1998, 'Focus' carried several items regarding serious problems in the grain distribution system. Soon after the program aired on July 18, the General Office of the State Council condemned wrongdoings in the purchase of grain. At the end of July 1998, the State Council convened a national conference for all provincial grain bureau chiefs. One session of the conference was devoted to watching the relevant 'Focus' programs and discussing ways to solve the highlighted problems. On July 31, 1998 the State Council passed a resolution to implement new statutes and sentences for illegalities in the grain trade.

As a result of such initiatives, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji now watches the program almost everyday. When he chairs a State Council meeting or other official meetings, he occasionally starts the meeting half an hour earlier than usual so that participants can watch recent episodes of 'Focus' broadcast over the previous few days. He then conducts a discussion on how to resolve the problems raised by the programs. He has said, "Many of the reports have been an inspiration to government and stimulated changes in our policies."<sup>11</sup>

Zhu highlighted the report of April 10, 1998, about the extremely high price of electricity for farmers in the countryside of Jilin Province—higher than those living in urban areas. He said he began to be aware of the problem when he visited Henan and Anhui a year before. The 'Focus' reports gave him a strong impression as to what the government should do about it. Later, the government decided to appropriate over 100 billion yuan (RMB) to rebuild the electricity network in the countryside, and to equalize the cost of electricity in rural areas with the price charged to city-dwellers.

### III. Changing Role of the Media

#### *Social Changes*

As a result of increased public debate, people have a greater sense of their rights, obligations, and responsibilities, as well as the common values of Chinese society. As Chinese-Canadian scholar Zhao Yuezhi points out, “watchdog journalism presupposes and helps to constitute basic ideological assumptions about the emerging social order – what are its rules, what is acceptable behavior, and who are the good guys and bad guys.”<sup>12</sup>

In addition to their newsgathering and reporting functions, the media can also play the role of social justice campaigner. There is a saying among ‘Focus’ fans that “‘Focus’ is our courtroom to argue against bully officials.” This very statement reveals the serious problems endemic to China and how media increasingly factors in their resolution. The public have few avenues through which to vent their anger and make their voice heard. Therefore, ordinary people turn to the media to argue their cases. To some extent, the mass media in China may bear the unusual burden of functioning as a quasi-judicial system as well as a news-reporting organization. As Chen Xiaowei, the former CCTV anchorwoman on ‘Sunday Topics’ points out:

Seeking justice for the public has evolved as an important function of the Chinese media. Such a function may be part of China's ‘*guoqing*’ - unique national situation. It is unique because rule of law has not been fully established in the country.<sup>13</sup>

More importantly, this public discussion has prompted people and officials to think hard about the underlying reasons for problems, such as corruption, and how their policies should be structured to overcome them. Social groups have become more active in speaking out and making suggestions on how to run a better society. Even in Beijing, a taxi driver will tell you his thoughts on anti-corruption and the battle against social problems. This open atmosphere for public discussion on real life cases and long-term solutions is conducive to the gradual development of a more open, tolerant, and democratic society.

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<sup>11</sup> *Zhongyang Dianshitai Nianjian* [China Central Television Yearbook], (1999) pp. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Zhao Yuezhi, “Watchdogs on Party Leashes? Contexts and Implications of Investigative Journalism in post-Deng China,” *Journalism Studies*, vol. 1 November 2000, pp. 577-597.

<sup>13</sup> Chen Xiaowei “The Multiple Roles of Media in Today’s Chinese Society,” Paper presented at Memory and Media in and of Contemporary China Conference, University of California, Berkeley, 2001.

### *A More Accountable and Responsive Government*

By publicizing cases of wrongdoing, the media has put pressure on the government to recognize and respond to social problems. For instance, when a big event suddenly takes place, the media ask for immediate interviews and quick reactions from the government. This in turn exerts a fairly large amount of pressure on the government to become conscious of their working methods and public role. Government officials, when faced with responding to the media in general, and TV cameras in particular, are likely to react more as individuals with views and personalities rather than simply making “anonymous” statements. This has improved their public image, and many have used this opportunity to rebuild their political capital. They have been trying very hard to improve their image in the media, therefore they have to be more responsible for what they say as individuals, and to appear somewhat livelier, less restricted, more animated, and less conservative. Consequently, they try to be more objective, specific, knowledgeable, and “attractive” to the general public through their media presentation. As a result, many authorities have made their routine work more transparent. In other words, Chinese media have indirectly influenced the government, and, to some extent, the whole society, to become more progressive.

As Xiao Yang, President of China's Supreme People's Court announced in April 1998,

All courts must be monitored conscientiously by public opinion, all cases shall be heard in public, except those involving state secrets, individual privacy or minors. Black box operation is not allowed. Media coverage is welcome.<sup>14</sup>

And, as Zhao Yuezhi noted, “On a more practical level, watchdog journalism helps the central leadership to implement concrete reform initiatives and strengthen the state by making it more efficient, open, and responsive.”<sup>15</sup>

Officials are themselves members of the media audience, as we have already seen. They watch television programs and assiduously follow other media coverage. When breaking news develops, mass media are major sources of information for government

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<sup>14</sup> Ye Xiaolin, “Xinwen Yulun Jiandu de Xianshi Huanjing yu Jizhe Dingwei” [“The Current Environment for Media Watchdog and Journalist Position”], *Zhongguo Guangbo Dianshi* [China Radio and Television], vol. 5, 2000, pp. 96-97.

officials. They closely monitor media to stay in tune with the aspirations and concerns of the general public and get the latest information on breaking news events. Moreover, the media is also under pressure to improve their own work and professionalism as they come under close public scrutiny. There is increased pressure to be objective, impartial, and accurate. In summary, daily oversight and pressure from the media is a part of everyday life, instead of, as in the past, an exceptional occurrence. Consequently, interaction among the media, government, and officials have made the whole of Chinese society much more open, transparent, and democratic.

### *Media as a Social Stabilizer*

By being an effective watchdog, the media has helped to stabilize Chinese society. This meets the demands of both the government and public. An executive producer of 'Focus', Ye Xiaolin, points out, "The watchdog function has formed an important social coordinating power that is outside the state machinery."<sup>16</sup> As Chen Xiaowei, former CCTV anchorwoman on 'Sunday Topics', notes, "The media serve as useful tools in both letting the public vent their concerns and resentments and helping the government find the bad apples."<sup>17</sup> Even President Jiang Zemin said, in 1994, "The watchdog function should try to help the government to improve their work, resolve problems, and enhance social stability."<sup>18</sup> Unlike Western countries, where there are many other factors contributing to a stable society, in the Chinese media there is an awareness of the importance of securing a stable social order. Many share the belief that China is a developing country under enormous pressure to feed its people through continuous economic development. Since social stability is the primary concern, some in the media industry believe they should act as a partner with the government in achieving that end.

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<sup>15</sup> Zhao Yuezhi, "Watchdogs on Party Leashes? Contexts and Implications of Investigative Journalism in post-Deng China," *Journalism Studies*, vol. 1 November 2000, pp. 577-597.

<sup>16</sup> Ye Xiaolin, "Xinwen Yulun Jiandu de Xianshi Huanjing yu Jizhe Dingwei" ["The Current Environment for Media Watchdog and Journalist Position"], *Zhongguo Guangbo Dianshi* [China Radio and Television], vol. 5, 2000, pp. 96-97.

<sup>17</sup> Chen Xiaowei "The Multiple Roles of Media in Today's Chinese Society," Paper presented at Memory and Media in and of Contemporary China Conference, University of California, Berkeley, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Jiang Zemin, "The Trend of Television Commentary Program," *Dianshi Pinglun Da Qushi* [Chinese Worker's Publishing House], 1999, pp. 114.

#### IV. Conclusion and Outlook

Generally speaking, Chinese media has much more freedom and “space” than before to pursue their professional goals and meet the needs of the audience. Unlike their previous role as a mere government mouthpiece, it can be argued that they have now become the voice of both the party and the public. The government guides the media only on significant political issues, such as those related to national security. As a provider of information, a stimulus for conversation, and a watchdog of the public interest, the media has developed dramatically and now plays a significant role throughout society. Chinese scholar Xiao Gongqin comments:

Through marketization, non-political, more self-controlled social fields have gradually emerged in China. The range of issues under political control has been gradually reduced, except for those areas related directly or indirectly to national security or public order.<sup>19</sup>

Having discussed the shift in Chinese television’s role, important questions remain as to why it has evolved this way, and whether it can sustain its evolution in Chinese society. The changing role of the media reflects broader social and political changes in China, but the reasons for this are numerous and complex. Firstly, one of the founders of ‘Focus’, Liang Jianzeng says, “‘Focus’ emergence and development is the product of the times.”<sup>20</sup> Yu Guoming, director of the Public Opinion Research Institute of People’s University, also points out:

Investigative journalism is a derivative companion of modern democratic politics and the development of a market economy. Changes in the Chinese media today indicate that China is stepping into a more open and confident age.<sup>21</sup>

After Deng Xiaoping’s historic trip to the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in 1992, the social climate became more open and tolerant. This has created opportunities for reformers to conduct new social experiments, and it is possible for television professionals to produce innovative programming.

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<sup>19</sup> Xiao Gongqin, “*Hou Quanneng Tizhi he 21 Shiji de Zhongguo Zhengzhi Fazhan*” [“Post-All round System and the Chinese Political Development in 21st Century”], *Zhanlue yu Guanli* [Strategy and Management], vol. 6, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Liang Jianzeng, “*Cong Linian dao Shijian*” [“From Perception to Practice”], *Studies Publisher*, 1998, pp. 5.

Secondly, the increasingly competitive society has prompted forward-looking Chinese television professionals to explore new ideas and encourage Chinese people to adopt more open and pluralistic attitudes. As mentioned earlier, Chinese media have had a comparatively large “space” in which to pursue their professional goals. As British scholar K. Gordon pointed out:

Being the cream of China’s journalist corps, these journalists are well educated and have a strong sense of social responsibility. They are fully aware of the American muckraking tradition and the liberal notion of watchdog journalism, and perhaps even carry an idealized view of this practice.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the so-called “Exposés of Wrongdoing” (investigative news reporting) have earned television journalists enormous prestige among their audience. On the other hand, corrupt officials as well as bullies and hustlers are more likely to target them as well. Journalists doing investigative reporting have been victims of beatings and verbal abuse. Such experiences have further enhanced reporters’ sense of social responsibility and improved their skill in dealing with difficult and even dangerous situations.

Third, media reform in China reflects a gradualist approach to social and political reform. As one of the founders of ‘Oriental Horizon’, Chen Meng, says:

Carrying out reform in China is a process of groping your way and testing what is possible by trying what you had not dared to do before. No one ever tells you that there is a field you can now report which was not allowed previously. The unique possibility is to fumble your way into new fields and let everybody recognize that your experiment is good. Consequently your practice is successful and accepted by the government and the public.<sup>23</sup>

Chen’s remarks summarize a significant characteristic of Chinese reform. Unlike Western countries, where legislation normally precedes enforcement, in China, reform sometimes occurs prior to the introduction of new laws, and in many cases is carried out in a quiet and covert manner. Reformers believe that the best way to initiate change is to act quietly when the overall circumstances are favorable to reform, rather than wait for formal

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<sup>21</sup> Yu Guoming, “Yulun Jiandu-Yijing Zuode he Yinggai Zuode” [“Watchdog Function: things have been done and things should be done”], *Zhongguo Guangbo Dianshi* [China Radio and Television], vol. 1, 1999, pp. 7-9.

<sup>22</sup> Zhao Yuezhi, “Watchdogs on Party Leashes? Contexts and Implications of Investigative Journalism in post-Deng China,” *Journalism Studies*, vol. 1 November 2000, pp. 577-597.

<sup>23</sup> Chen Meng, “The rise of Chinese Documentary Filmmaking and its Engagement with Ordinary People,” Paper presented at Memory and Media in and of Contemporary China Conference, University of California, Berkeley, 2001.



signals. Enacting new legislation often marks the final, not the first, step in the reform process. Like other social and political changes, reformers in the media also prefer the evolutionary and gradualist approach. There is a widespread belief among reform-minded individuals that progressive reforms that bring gradual improvement are better than drastic changes that could potentially result in social chaos. In practice, an evolutionary approach has better chances for success, as it minimizes the social costs of reform. Proponents of gradual reform believe both the government and the public need time to cultivate a sense of maturity and modernity and to adapt to an open society. Chinese scholar Xiao Gongqin also observes:

It is believed that China has successfully implemented the transition from a centralized power and a planned economy with a centralized political regime to a more pluralistic social-political pattern. This has been achieved through the mode of reform, not through revolution, especially since 80's, and Deng Xiaoping's speech in Southern China.<sup>24</sup>

This mentality is partly due to the development of a Chinese middle-class, which has benefited from the fruits of economic reform: they own their own houses and cars; travel outside China more often; and are able to afford better education for their children by sending them abroad. This new middle-class wants a stable society to help secure their living standards. Meanwhile, they also want better social and political systems to protect their property and lifestyles. Although some people in China may not be happy with everything the government accomplishes, they do not want to see chaotic social changes that will lead to a lose-lose situation for all people in China. Thus, it is not hard to understand this preference for “evolution, not revolution.” Li Xiguang, director of the Center for International Communications Studies of Tsinghua University, explains:

The press and the Chinese public are indifferent and show no interest in the activities of a handful of political dissidents. This reflects a new mood of the public: Chinese do want to enter a modern society with Internet, private housing and private cars but without a Russian economic collapse and a Yugoslavian bloodshed.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Xiao Gongqin, , “Hou Quanneng Tizhi he 21 Shiji de Zhongguo Zhengzhi Fazhan” [“Post-All round System and the Chinese Political Development in 21st Century”], *Zhanlue yu Guanli* [Strategy and Management], vol. 6, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Li Xiguang, “Great sound makes no noise -- Creeping Freedoms in Chinese Press,” The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Working Paper Series, John F.Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1999.

Fourth, China's top government leaders also realize the important role that media and programs such as 'Focus' could play in the reform process. In the past decade, corruption has become the greatest challenge to the Party and the government. From top leaders to ordinary citizens, people regard corruption as the number one problem in China. One could almost say that the government relies on the news media to play an oversight role in the process of cracking down on corruption and wrongdoing. As Elisabeth Rosenthal notes:

The central government also clearly appreciates that the press can be an effective weapon in its battles with local officials, who have increasingly ignored national laws and policies, imposing taxes and penalties on their own.<sup>26</sup>

Chinese leaders have thrown their full weight behind the media's watchdog function—at least in some areas of government, mostly at the local and regional level—and their support is reflected in one of the Party's official documents. President Jiang Zemin announced in the report of the 15<sup>th</sup> National Party's Congress in 1997 that, "we shall integrate the supervision within the Party with that by the law and the masses and give scope to the role of supervision by public opinion."<sup>27</sup> Premier Zhu Rongji too uttered his now famous expression of praise on October 7, 1998, "'Focus' is the tongue and throat of the people, the mirror of the Party and the pioneer of the reform."<sup>28</sup> And Ye Xiaolin, an executive producer of 'Focus', said, "this is our best period to practice our function as a public watchdog - because we know we have full support from the government."<sup>29</sup>

### *Some Concerns*

Nonetheless, Chinese television is not completely free from political control. Chinese television is discouraged from playing a quasi-oppositional role against the government and top leadership. While they are encouraged to expose wrongdoings at the lower levels of government, this does not mean that they can do the same at the top. Thus, some say that, "'Focus' only kills flies, but not tigers." So far the highest-ranking officials who have been

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<sup>26</sup> Elisabeth Rosenthal, "A Muckraking Program Draws 300 Million Daily," *The New York Times*, July 2, 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Jiang Zemin, Report at the 15th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, "Gaoju Dengxiaoping Lilun de Weida Qizhi, Ba Jianshe You Zhongguo Tese de Shehuizhuyi Quanmian Tuixiang 21 Shiji" ["Hold High the Great Banner of Deng Xiaoping Theory for an All-round Advancement of the Cause of Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics to the 21st Century"], September 13, 1997.

<sup>28</sup> Zhu Rongji, "Qianyan" ["Preface"], *Jiaodian de Huisheng* [The Echo of the 'Focus'], China University of Political Science and Law publisher, 1998, pp. 1-4.

criticized include Cheng Kejie, a former Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, and Hu Changqing, a former deputy governor of eastern China's Jiangxi Province. Also, while the media can oppose wrongdoing on certain issues for which the government offers support, such as corruption, the line is not so clear where government support has not been articulated.

Media professionals also express concern over the lack of legal protection for their role as a social watchdog. Although the watchdog role of the news media has been written into the report of the 15<sup>th</sup> National Communist Party Congress, no relevant law has been enacted. The media remain under threat from the powers-that-be who exercise their influence through personal connections, or “*guanxi*.” As market forces increasingly prevail, there has also been concern about the lack of high-quality programs with cultural and historical values and in-depth analysis of issues. As Zhao Yuezhi observes: “‘Attractiveness’ and ‘grabbing viewers’ are important program considerations.”<sup>30</sup> This market-oriented thinking, however, has sometimes become an obstacle to producing shows with more cultural and historical values, especially news analysis programs that do not have wide public appeal. Living in a marketizing economy, some journalists themselves have been corrupted as enterprises and interest groups want to them to advocate their products or causes.

### *Outlook*

China will remain open and continue to carry out reforms, and the news media will continue to play a watchdog role, perhaps even more actively than before. There can be no going back. However, any social reform has to be gradual. It cannot be done overnight. Moreover, there might be some temporary setbacks and fluctuations in the process.

The media, in carrying out their role as watchdog of the public interest, rely heavily on the continued commitment to government reform which, in turn, relies on the judgement of top leaders about domestic stability and international relations. However, perceived anti-

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<sup>29</sup> Ye Xiaolin, “Xinwen Yulun Jiandu de Xianshi Huangjing yu Jizhe Dingwei” [“The current environment for Media Watchdog and Journalist Position”], *Zhongguo Guangbo Dianshi* [China Radio and Television], vol.5, 2000, pp. 96-97.

<sup>30</sup> Zhao Yuezhi, “Watchdogs on Party Leashes? Contexts and Implications of Investigative Journalism in post-Deng China,” *Journalism Studies*, vol. 1 November 2000, pp. 577-597.

China sentiments in Western countries, particularly in the U.S., often provide ammunition for Chinese conservatives to block reform. As Li Xiguang comments:

Many Chinese journalists and intellectuals assume that the society will eventually *have* to liberalize. The biggest threat to their personal freedoms, many say, would be a souring of Chinese-American relations that might strengthen conservative forces here.<sup>31</sup>

Americans who wish to see positive change in China must be careful not to push too hard. If Americans go too far and advocate chaotic change, even immediate overthrow of the current government, they will set back the cause of reform, and force reformers underground. It is likely, however, that the news media in China will make great efforts to gain more freedom and to be more representative of public opinion. This in turn may exert further influence on government policymaking and have an even more powerful impact on government.

In addition, there will be more intense competition in the media industry after China enters the World Trade Organisation. CCTV will then have to compete against both foreign and domestic counterparts. In order to win market-share, Chinese television journalists will have to be more independent. Only by achieving these goals can they build up their own credibility. It is more likely that they will have to display the skill of playing “table tennis by the edge,” meaning maximizing the room to maneuver under government policies. On the other hand, conflict between journalists and government officials over control of the media is likely to become increasingly fierce as some officials begin to view the media as troublemakers. These officials may try to place more restrictive controls on the media rather than make good use of them. Regardless of the outcome of this power struggle, however, both sides will become more proficient and skillful at dealing with one another.

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<sup>31</sup> Li Xiguang, “Great sound makes no noise -- Creeping Freedoms in Chinese Press,” The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Working Paper Series, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1999.