

Negotiations and Asymmetric Games in Chinese Editorial Departments: The Search for Editorial Autonomy by Journalists of *Dongfang Zaobao* and *Pengpai/The Paper*

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ABSTRACT: At the beginning of the twenty-first century, journalism in China was marked by a breakthrough in investigative journalism that resulted from a particular conjuncture: the central government's wish to control local authorities through surveillance by the media, coupled with the desire of a new generation of journalists to carry out investigations in a professional manner. Between 2003 and 2016, a group of journalists in Shanghai running the daily paper *Dongfang Zaobao* and then the news site *Pengpai* bore witness to this period. A series of interviews with these journalists enabled us to understand their strategy over the long term and identify a phase of negotiations with the authorities that led to the creation of media and a period of asymmetric game-playing to produce information. It emerged that although the journalists accumulated major successes in matters of investigation, the authorities ultimately always curtailed editorial freedom.

KEYWORDS: Journalism, investigation, media, game, negotiation, censorship, Shanghai.

Introduction

On 1 January 2017, the Shanghai daily paper *Dongfang Zaobao* (東方早報, *Oriental Morning Post*) ceased publication, marking the end of a journalistic adventure begun in July 2003. Although *Dongfang Zaobao* was less well-known than the Guangzhou paper *Nanfang Dushibao* (南方都市報) and Beijing's *Xinjingbao* (新京報), Chinese journalists nonetheless considered it one of the best metropolitan newspapers (*dushibao* 都市報) of all the commercial general news publications founded after the revival of economic reforms in 1992.¹ The closure of *Dongfang Zaobao* did not, however, mean the end of the journalistic ambitions of its 20-strong management team. In July 2014, it initiated the first online pure news player in China: *Pengpai* (澎湃, *The Paper*), circulated first and foremost on mobile telephones.

These unique events gave us the opportunity over the long term to examine the strategy and motivations of a stable group of journalists who twice negotiated the unlocking of editorial space with an authoritarian regime (Stockmann 2013) before going on to provide editorial content. The journalists were aware, however, that the authorities considered them a mouthpiece for those in power (*houshe* 喉舌), who controlled the media through an approval system (*shenpizhi* 審批制)² and issued directives to

editorial staff through the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (*Zhonggong zhongyang xuanchuanbu* 中共中央宣傳部) (Brady 2008). Moreover, the authorities had the power to contract the editorial space conceded when the media organ was created and censor the journalists' work. We might, therefore, be justified in thinking that these journalists had no choice but to either renounce their professional ambitions or confront propaganda head-on. However, the interviews revealed a more nuanced reality: the journalists believed it possible to use the situation to their advantage in what we are calling an asymmetrical game. Why did they believe in this possibility? How did they exercise their profession in this context? What conclusions did they draw from this experience?

1. We make a distinction between Party newspapers (*dangbao* 黨報) such as *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao* 人民日報), whose circulation is based on the subscriptions of government departments and public companies, and commercial newspapers that generate income through advertising revenue and sales to private individuals. Although also controlled by the Party, the latter benefit from greater editorial autonomy. This dual press system has been termed "propagandist/commercial" (Zhao 1998: 161).
2. The approval system (*shenpizhi* 審批制) is the basis on which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) controls the media. All media creation must first be approved by the authorities who deliver a publication licence (*kanhao* 刊號), and all media are placed under the responsibility of a management institution (*zhuguan danwei* 主管單位), itself controlled by the CCP: government department, associations, companies, etc.

The idea that the relationship between journalists and the authorities in China may be considered a negotiation between partners who do not share the same ideas on information rather than a head-on confrontation between irreconcilable adversaries has already been expressed. For example, Huang Chengju suggested a fresh analysis of Chinese media in order to move from a "control to negotiation model" (Huang 2007: 402). He defined negotiation as "a bargaining process during which each party of the game has to more or less consider other players' interests and possible reaction before making its own decision" (*ibid.*: 405). He considered "not totally unimaginable that some kind of 'serious journalism' could become a new negotiation ground between the media, the state and the market in the near future" (*ibid.*: 406).

More recently, Maria Repnikova emphasised that: "What goes unnoticed beneath the stark imagery of collision between the mighty state and the fearless, isolated critics, however, is the web of complex negotiation taking place between some Chinese journalists and party officials" (Repnikova 2017: 8). In her opinion, during "guarded improvisations" (*ibid.*: xiii):

Journalists and officials make *ad hoc* creative adjustments in response to one another, with the state maintaining ample room for modification in endorsing, constraining and responding to watchdog reporting, and with journalists improvising by reinterpreting official policies and working by bypass political restrictions in the haze of dynamic ambiguity. (*ibid.*: 18)

However, these authors see the idea of negotiation in very broad terms that encompass formal discussions between journalists and the authorities, techniques for bypassing censorship, and procedures for the gathering and dissemination of information. More generally, the idea of negotiation would seem to cover all forms of the relationship between the authorities and journalists where the latter are not seen simply as channels for the transmission of propaganda. Such a broad definition might give the impression that everything is negotiable. However, this is far from being the case, since the commercialisation of the media and investigative journalism respect a framework drawn up by the authorities. In particular, journalists cannot negotiate the core principles of information under a socialist regime: no media outlet can be created unless it is approved by the authorities, and it must conform to the directives of the Department of Propaganda, notably where sensitive political information is concerned.

The idea of negotiation must therefore be confined to the specific phase during which journalists and the authorities discuss the creation of a new media organisation. This is followed by a period of asymmetric game-playing during which editors publish news and each party attempts to interpret the negotiated agreement to their own advantage. This distinction respects that already followed by Pan Zhandong, who noted that "media practitioners consent to the legitimacy of Party control and submit themselves to such control" before embarking upon "non-routine practices to 'break through' the confines of the Party-press in some local domains" in the hope that these will then be endorsed by the Party (Pan 2008: 9). Distinguishing the negotiation phase from the game phase also helps put into perspective the advantages of applying James Scott's theory of the arts of resistance to the study of the Chinese journalists. Indeed, according to James Scott, "Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a 'hidden transcript' that represents a critique of power, spoken behind the back of the dominant" (Scott 2008: 12). It is true that Chinese journalists are indeed in a subordinate position *vis-à-vis* the CCP and their employers. Although this places them alongside the "dominated," it nonetheless constitutes only one

facet of a more ambivalent identity than that of the slaves, serfs, colonised peoples, and lower castes studied by Scott. The Chinese journalists are also on the side of the "dominants" by virtue of their profession and their right to carry out investigations. Moreover, the public discourse of some journalists rivals that of propaganda, and cannot be qualified as "infrapolitics" in the sense of "resistance that avoids any public declaration of its intentions" (*ibid.*: 237). On the contrary, these professionals openly declare their wish to produce information for the public. It is therefore more appropriate to affirm that journalists occupy an intermediate position, at one and the same time dominated and dominant, so although their behaviour can, in part, be considered an art of resistance, it also displays active collaboration with the authorities.

It is the mechanisms of this ambivalent relationship between a group of journalists and the authorities that this article seeks to examine. In doing so, we have found it useful to draw upon game theory. Game theory, which has its origins in economics, has inspired research in the political and social sciences, notably in the sociology of organisations in line with the work of Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg. For sociologists, the actors in an organisation never restrict themselves to that which is planned by the hierarchy, organisational charts, and standard procedures:

There are no social systems that are entirely regulated or controlled. The individual or collective players within them cannot be reduced to abstract and disembodied functions. They are players in their own right who, within the often very heavy constraints imposed upon them by "the system," have at their disposal a margin of freedom that they use in a strategic manner in their interactions with others. (Crozier and Friedberg 1977: 29-30)

The observation of organisations shows that the actors use "available zones of uncertainty to constantly negotiate their own wishes and to impose, as far as possible, their own orientations on the other players" (*ibid.*: 90). It is this interaction that Crozier and Friedberg term a "game."

The game is the instrument that people have developed to regulate their cooperation. It is the essential instrument in organised action. The game reconciles freedom and constraint. The player remains free, but if he wants to win, he must adopt a rational strategy in accordance with the nature of the game and respect its rules. This means that he must accept the constraints imposed upon him in order to advance his own interests. (*ibid.*: 113)

This is the theoretical framework within which the interviews with 12 journalists, two women and 10 men, were conducted. The group was far from representative of the 228,000 holders of the press card delivered by the Chinese state.³ It was almost exclusively male, although 43% of Chinese journalists are women, and represented less than 10% of the staff of *Dongfang Zaobao* and *Pengpai*, whose editorial departments had a staff of around 200 journalists. It also had the particularity of being made up solely of people occupying positions of authority. Nonetheless, the idea that these journalists have of their job made them representative of the "advocate professionals" identified by Jonathan Hassid. As such, they combined a

3. "我國持證記者已超過22.8萬人" (Woguo chi zheng jizhe yi chaoguo 22.8 wan ren, China has more than 228,000 accredited press card holders), *Xinhua*, 7 November 2017, www.xinhuanet.com/2017-11/07/c_1121920358.htm (accessed on 24 September 2018).

strong wish for autonomy with a desire to represent “the people,” ‘vulnerable social’ groups (*ruoshi qunti* 弱勢群體) and others against the predations of society or the State” (Hassid 2011: 825).⁴ In the years 1990 and 2000, the Guangzhou press, and in particular the Nanfang Press Group (*Nanfang ribao baoye jituan* 南方日報報業集團), was the epicentre of these “advocate professionals” employed in newspapers with a reputation for investigative journalism, such as *Nanfang Zhoumo* (南方周末) and *Nanfang Dushibao*. The core leaders of *Dongfang Zaobao* and *Pengpai* journalists came from the Nanfang Press Group.

Twenty-eight interviews with 12 journalists were conducted between 2005 and 2017. Nine of these journalists had worked first for *Dongfang Zaobao*,⁵ then for *Pengpai*. They had occupied posts as deputy editors-in-chief, and heads and deputy heads of departments. When *Dongfang Zaobao* was launched, they were between 30 and 33 years old. They were all university graduates, two-thirds of them with a Bachelor’s degree and one third with a Masters. Half of them had studied journalism, the other half the arts, economics, or languages. Two-thirds of them were not from Shanghai. Half came from inland provinces (Guizhou, Hunan, etc.). The geographic marker was clear for the three investigative journalists we met in the course of this study. They were from the second-tier cities of Guizhou, Hunan, and Jiangxi. This specificity made them members of the “Hunan Gang” (*Hunanbang* 湖南幫), an expression created by researchers at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou in the light of the over-representation of the central and western provinces amongst investigative journalists (Shen and Zhang 2013).⁶ This geographical specificity was accompanied by a particularity of a social order: the investigative journalists were of humble social origins, since their parents were secondary school teachers, small shopkeepers, or local civil servants, whilst other journalists tended to be of a higher social class. Yet there seems to be a correlation between the geographical and social origin of the investigative journalists and a pronounced interest in social problems, inequality, and abuses of power. It was no coincidence that the best-known investigative journalists of the 1990s and 2000s such as Deng Fei 鄧飛 and Wang Keqin 王克勤 belonged to the “Hunan Gang.”

At least two interviews were held with each journalist, the first in semi-directive form with an interview guide. In subsequent interviews, the journalists could express themselves freely from the starting-point of questions linked to the way in which the news was dealt with by their media. The interviews were always one-on-one, three quarters of them outside of media offices (*cafés*, homes, parks) and the remaining quarter behind closed doors in the media offices. The languages used were Mandarin most of the time and English in the few cases where the journalist had a solid grasp of the language. The journalists were granted anonymity. This article begins by describing the strategy pursued by the journalists during the negotiations that led to the creation of *Dongfang Zaobao* in 2003, and *Pengpai* in 2014. It then goes on to examine the asymmetric game developed during the years they were in charge of these media. Lastly, it will assess the gains and losses recorded by the journalists.

A strategy of commitment

The founding of *Dongfang Zaobao* and *Pengpai* was not planned by the authorities, who then designated journalists to implement them, but was the result of negotiations between the journalists and the authorities during which the former highlighted their skills and obtained editorial space. “Shanghai authorities wanted to create a quality newspaper for white-collar workers but didn’t know how to go about it,” says a former manager

of *Dongfang Zaobao*’s picture department.⁷ “Money wasn’t a problem, we were refused nothing in terms of equipment,”⁸ recalls a deputy manager of the department. It was the same story in 2013 during discussions over the creation of *Pengpai*: “We had an objective in common with the authorities: to create a new media outlet to compensate for the decline of the traditional media. It was the right moment to present our project,” says a deputy chief-editor of *Pengpai*.⁹

So it was that in the Spring of 2003, a team of eight people from Guangzhou travelled to Shanghai on behalf of the Nanfang Press Group in order to negotiate the launch of a new daily paper with the municipal authorities. The team was led by Shen Hao 沈顥, a former editor-in-chief of the weekly *Nanfang Zhoumo*.¹⁰ The aim was to create a non-specialist daily paper covering financial and economic news (*caijinglei zonghe baozhi* 財經類綜合報紙) for white-collar workers in the Yangzi Delta. The Nanfang Press Group had decided to exploit the right granted to press groups by the General Administration of Press and Publications (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo xinwen chubansongshu* 中華人民共和國新聞出版總署) in May 2002 to cooperate at the inter-provincial level in the creation of newspapers.¹¹ The reform was intended to help press groups overcome the administrative barriers hindering their geographical expansion. For the Nanfang Group, crowned with editorial and commercial success symbolised by the Sun Zhigang affair 孫志剛事件 in spring 2003,¹² the reform offered an opportunity to step outside its southern base. At the same time as the Shanghai project, it embarked on the creation of a daily paper in Beijing, *Xinjingbao*.¹³ For its part, the Shanghai municipal authorities hoped to inject new life into its local press, which had the reputation of being dull in comparison to those of Guangzhou and Beijing. The two parties came to an agreement under which the united Wenhui-Xinmin Press Group (*Wenhui-Xinmin lianhe baoye jituan* 文匯新民聯合報業集團), linked to the Shanghai committee of the CCP, provided the publication licence (*kanhao* 刊號) and the greater part of the 100 million RMB needed to launch the paper, whilst the Nanfang Group sent

4. Jonathan Hassid identified four ideal-type Chinese journalists: traditional “mouthpieces,” workaday journalists, advocate professionals, and American-style professionals.
5. The author was awarded a field-study grant by the CEFC in 2007, for work undertaken at *Dongfang Zaobao*.
6. In the study carried out in 2010 by Shen Fei and Zhang Zh’an, Hunan Province headed the list of places of origin of investigative journalists, hence the expression “Hunan Gang” suggested by the authors. In 2017, a second study carried out by Zhang Zh’an and Cao Yanhui placed Henan Province at the top of the list, followed by Hubei and Hunan.
7. Interview with the author on 10 January 2007.
8. Interview with the author on 16 July 2008.
9. Interview with the author on 22 October 2015.
10. At the time of the negotiations over the creation of *Dongfang Zaobao*, Shen Hao 沈顥 was editor-in-chief of *21 Shiji Jingji Baodao* (21世紀經濟報道), a newspaper specialising in the economy created by the Nanfang Group in 2001.
11. General Administration of Press and Publications (GAPP), “關於新聞出版業跨地區經營的若干意見” (Guanyu xinwen chubansongshu de ruogan yijian, Some opinions concerning cross-regional operation in the press and publications sector), 3 June 2002. Translated into English by China Copyright and Media, chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2002/06/03/some-opinions-concerning-cross-regional-operation-in-the-press-and-publications-sector/#more-1132 (consulted on 12 July 2018).
12. A native of Hubei Province, Sun Zhigang 孫志剛 was not carrying his provisional certificate of residence when stopped by the police in Guangzhou on 17 March 2003. Placed in a detention and repatriation centre, he died three days later. Basing its comments on the results of an autopsy, *Nanfang Dushibao* stated on 25 April 2003 that Sun Zhigang had been beaten before he died. On 20 June 2003, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao 溫家寶 announced the abrogation of detention and repatriation centres. For further information on the Sun Zhigang affair, see, for example, Thireau and Hua’s article (2005: 137-64).
13. *Xinjingbao* appeared in November 2003. It was created by the Nanfang Group in cooperation with the press group *Guangming Ribao baoye jituan* 光明日報報業集團, which edited the daily *Guangming Ribao* 光明日報 (Clarity).

journalists and administrative staff to Shanghai.¹⁴

The first issue of *Dongfang Zaobao* appeared on the newsstands on 7 July 2003. Its management was convinced that it could reproduce in Shanghai the successful press model initiated in Guangzhou, which was based on local news and investigative journalism that revealed malfunctions in government and society. In July 2003, the authorities had not yet begun to rein in *Nanfang Dushibao*, which had distinguished itself in the Sun Zhigang affair. In 2007, a deputy manager of the photographic department summed up the prevailing feeling: "We did not even really know who was in charge of the paper in the beginning. Was it the Nanfang Group or the Shanghai municipal authorities?"¹⁵

A decade later, negotiations similar to those held in 2003 took place in Shanghai between most of the same group of journalists who had launched *Dongfang Zaobao* and the authorities, this time for the creation of an online news media organ. Indeed, the *Dongfang Zaobao* experiment was drawing to a close. The print newspaper saw that its economic situation had rapidly declined. In 2012, its advertising revenue had halved in comparison with 2010, and its circulation had dropped by half in comparison to 2007.¹⁶ Instead of passively waiting for its expected demise, in 2013, the journalists began to think about creating a media organisation adapted to the arrival of smartphones and social media.¹⁷ It was a question of acting on the consequences of changes in the information paradigm attendant on the arrival of the Internet and social media that had resulted in the loss of the monopoly of journalists on the production and dissemination of information. With their mobile supports, Internet users could now create and publish information. As Kevin Latham points out, from a passive mass, the Chinese "are increasingly conceptualized as consumers of media and other products and as individuals with information needs and desires" (Latham 2005: 205). However, "it is important to remember that the government has actively promoted the deployment and use of the Internet for leisure, commercial and information-gathering purposes" and that it did so "not in ignorance of the potential of the Internet for promoting public debate and political activism, but in spite of it and with the confidence that any such potential can be satisfactorily contained" (*ibid.*: 213). Given the ailing finances of *Dongfang Zaobao*, however, where was the money for launching digital media to be found? To resolve this equation, the journalists leveraged the ascendancy to supreme power of Xi Jinping, hitherto head of the Shanghai Communist Party. In fact, after fearing contagion by the Arab Spring demonstrations in 2011 and observing the way Weibo was being used to criticise the Government after the Wenzhou high-speed train accident,¹⁸ CCP leaders began to worry about the increasing power of social media. Appointed general secretary of the CCP in November 2012 and conscious of the inevitable decline of traditional media, Xi Jinping set himself the objective of "occupy[ing] the commanding height of information and communication" by the creation of "strong online armies."¹⁹ He realised this ambition by means of a dual strategy: on the one hand, by tightening up checks on existing media and social networks,²⁰ and on the other, by major public investment in new digital media.

However, Xi Jinping and Lu Wei 魯煒, director of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC, *Wangxinban* 網信辦) created in November 2013, lacked experience. They needed guides in order to find their way in a world of rapid technological change. They therefore paid great attention to the plan to create the first Chinese information application, submitted by the *Dongfang Zaobao* team via the Shanghai United Media Group (*Shanghai baoye* 上海報業).²¹ With a budget of 300 million yuan, the project was given the name *Pengpai*. Lu Wei declared his support for the new media by visiting it four days before it was launched on 22 July 2014.²²

The *Dongfang Zaobao* journalists rejoiced. Not only were they preserving hundreds of jobs when other printed media in Shanghai were closing up shop, but they had also obtained an extension of their editorial space. For whereas *Dongfang Zaobao* was a provincial publication, the support of the CAC gave *Pengpai* national status. Although the printed media organisation was destined to disappear, negotiation with the authorities had made its journalists Chinese pioneers in information applications. In short, it was through negotiation with the authorities in 2003 and 2014 that a single group of journalists was able to obtain the creation of two information media organisations and the opening up of editorial space.

The rules of the asymmetric game

Once the media organisations had been created, an asymmetric game began during which the journalists tried to exploit to the full the editorial space they had obtained during the negotiation phase. In 2003, they undertook to extend to Shanghai an ideal forged in Guangzhou within the Nanfang Press Group. Shen Hao, the team's leader, embodied this ideal. It was he who had written the 1999 New Year editorial for *Nanfang Zhoumo* that even today journalists cite as one of the reasons they chose to enter the profession. Shen Hao speaks of "a force that constantly pushes us to seek justice, goodness, and conscience. This force comes from you, from each of you."²³ A slogan repeated in journalistic circles in Guangzhou sums up this ambition: "It may be that certain truths cannot yet be said, but never lie" (*keyi hai you weijiang de zhenhua, dan jue bu neng shuo jiahua* 可以有還未講的真話,但決不能說假話).²⁴

An investigative journalist at *Dongfang Zaobao* speaks of his commitment in the following terms: "One must have an ideal, the feeling of a mission to accomplish; to drive society to progress or bring problems to light. In the time of the emperors, civil servants could express criticisms, so why not now?"²⁵ A manager in the images department of *Dongfang Zaobao* is convinced that "even though we do not have freedom of the press, we can nonetheless do something useful and exercise a form of supervision, however

14. The press groups *Zhejiang Ribao* 浙江日報 in Hangzhou and *Xinhua Ribao* 新華日報 in Nanjing also participated in financing it.

15. Interview with the author on 21 August 2007.

16. Figures obtained by the author during interviews.

17. Apple commercialised the first iPhone in 2007; Weibo 微博 was born in 2009 and Weixin 微信 in 2011.

18. On 23 July 2011, 40 people died in a collision between two high-speed trains near Wenzhou. In the days that followed, internet users expressed vehement criticism of the authorities on Weibo.

19. "Xi Jinping's 19 August speech revealed?", *China Copyright and Media*, 12 November 2013. Translated into English by *China Copyright and Media*, chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2013/11/12/xi-jinpings-19-august-speech-revealed-translation (consulted on 12 July 2018).

20. Amongst the measures taken to ensure control of micro-bloggers is the decision of the Supreme People's Court of China in September 2012, according to which all online writing judged defamatory and seen more than 5,000 times or transferred more than 500 times can result in three years' imprisonment for its author. Supreme People's Court, 10 September 2013, http://www.spp.gov.cn/spp/zdgg/201309/t20130910_62417.shtml (accessed on 31 May 2019).

21. The Shanghai United Media Group (*Shanghai baoye jituan* 上海報業集團) was the result of the merger on 28 October 2013, of the United Wenhui-Xinmin Media Group and the Liberation Press Group (*Jiefang Ribao baoye jituan* 解放日報報業集團).

22. "中國互聯網大總管魯煒現身澎湃" (Zhongguo hulianwang dazongguan Lu Wei xianshen Pengpai, Lu Wei, Director of Chinese Internet visited Pengpai), *Pengpai*, 18 July 2014 (personal archives, the online page has been removed).

23. "總有一種力量讓我淚流滿面" (Zong you yi zhong liliang rang women lei liu manmian, There exists a force capable of making us cry), *Nanfang Zhoumo*, 1 January 1999, www.infzm.com/content/22205 (accessed on 12 July 2018).

24. Huang Wenyu 黃文俞, deputy manager of the Propaganda Department of Guangdong Province, would be the first to use this phrase during the fifth anniversary of the creation of *Nanfang Zhoumo* in 1987. For the origin of the phrase, see Hong Bing (2007).

25. Interview with the author 28 August 2017.

limited.”²⁶ This conviction explains why the journalists agreed to be part of an asymmetric game with the authorities with the intention of exploiting the “zones of uncertainty” mentioned by Crozier and Friedberg (1977: 90).

As a result, the first months of *Dongfang Zaobao* were marked by editorial audacity. The paper criticised the Shanghai municipal authorities despite the rule that a media organisation must never take issue with the Party committee on which it depends. For example, on 29 July 2003, an investigation of the main seafood market revealed that hygiene standards were not being respected.²⁷ In September, the paper opposed the town’s plan to abolish its small street restaurants. When the city’s authorities modified its project, the paper stated that this reversal in policy had occurred “after a series of reports in *Dongfang Zaobao*.”²⁸

The year 2008 proved exceptional. As soon as news of the Sichuan earthquake that claimed 80,000 lives on 12 May reached the paper, it decided to send a reporter and photographer to the scene. They were on their way to the airport when the Central Propaganda Department issued a circular forbidding the commercial media to send journalists to the areas affected by the earthquake. *Dongfang Zaobao* was one of the rare Chinese papers that refused to obey. “I will never forget the day we said ‘No!’ to the Propaganda Department,” recalls a deputy editor-in-chief.²⁹ On 14 May, the paper was the first media organisation to publish a report that had not come from the official Chinese news agency.³⁰ It included the photo of a schoolgirl who died when her school collapsed, the first mention of the many school buildings that collapsed on their pupils.

A second stunt took place on 11 September 2008 with the publication of a story that established the implication of the Sanlu company in the scandal of baby milk powder contaminated with melamine.³¹ Added to the milk to raise its protein levels, the melamine caused babies to develop kidney problems, from which some died. On the evening it was published, the Ministry of Health confirmed the *Dongfang Zaobao* report. This scoop conferred immense prestige on the paper. Its circulation increased by 70,000 copies to reach 270,000.³² It was at this point, and thanks to investigative journalism, that the paper became profitable – five years after it was launched.

The affair of the baby milk powder is emblematic of the type of Chinese investigative journalism that flourished in the 1990s and 2000s. It is an editorial style that exploits the possibilities offered by the adoption, at the 13th Congress of the Communist Party in 1987, of the concept of “supervision by public opinion” (*yulun jian du* 輿論監督). The media are invited by the authorities to investigate malfunctions in society and embezzlement by civil servants in order to help the central government remedy these problems. The central authorities would like journalists to observe the lower ranks in the power hierarchy and reveal problems that can be solved without calling the political system into question. Very many subjects remain taboo however: national leaders, political opponents, the army, separatist movements, etc. Despite these limitations, supervision by public opinion unlocked a vast space for journalists to investigate economic and social subjects that are not explicitly forbidden by the censor.

In 2014, the digital application *Pengpai* also had high ambitions of investigative journalism. On 22 July, the day of its launch, it published an investigation into a judicial error in Anhui Province.³³ Eight hours later, the Anhui Supreme People’s Court declared its intention to re-open the file. On 21 January 2015, *Pengpai* uncovered a case of corruption in Nehe Prison in Heilongjiang Province, in which a prisoner was able to commit crimes with the complicity of the guards.³⁴ The article went viral on social media. The affair went beyond the provincial level when the Supreme People’s

Court of China ordered a general enquiry into the prison system. This type of publication saw *Pengpai*’s ratings increase dramatically: between October 2014 and March 2016, the number of unique visitors to the online media app each day quadrupled whilst advertising revenue increased six-fold.³⁵ Favouring publication on mobile telephones did not therefore harm the investigations. This medium proved compatible with quality information and made possible a variety of formats: it was still possible to publish long articles, and these could be enriched with videos and infographics.

However, the move to digital was accompanied by a change in the rhythm and method of working. For example, *Pengpai* continued to hold editorial meetings in the presence of the management representing the Communist Party and department heads, but these now served mainly to check on the progress of articles rather than to introduce them. Indeed, most of the topics had already been discussed before the editorial meeting in the course of a permanent discussion group on Weixin (微信, Wechat).

Since they were the sponsors of *Pengpai*, it was in the interests of the CAC and Lu Wei that the new media succeed. The editorial team therefore benefitted from the benevolence of the national authorities in carrying out certain investigations. “The support of the CAC was a great help to us,” admits an investigative journalist. “The civil servants replied more readily to our questions since they thought we were the eye of the central government.”³⁶ A department head was pleased that “Xi Jinping’s wish to fight against corruption opened up the possibility to write about those in high office.”³⁷

Moreover, whilst *Dongfang Zaobao* did not carry a political column, *Pengpai* was able to tackle this subject.

We decided to focus our editorial line on politics, current affairs, and debates because the public does not only want to be informed of events, but also to understand what is at stake. The problem was that we couldn’t discuss everything. It was as though we were sharing a house with the authorities: the journalists were permitted to move about on the ground and first floor but could not go any higher.³⁸

26. Interview with the author on 31 October 2008.

27. “小龍蝦驚曝黑幕” (Xiaolongxia jingpu heimu, The hidden truth about crayfish), *Dongfang Zaobao*, 29 July 2003 (personal archives).

28. “上海收回‘50平米生死令’” (Shanghai shouhui “50 pingmi shengsiling”, Shanghai withdraws “the order to close restaurants of less than 50 square metres”), *Dongfang Zaobao*, 29 September 2003 (personal archives).

29. Interview with the author on 22 October 2015.

30. “聚源中學：絕望與希望” (Juyuan zhongxue: juewang yu xiwang, Juyuan College: Despair and hope), *Dongfang Zaobao*, 14 May 2008 (personal archives).

31. “甘肅14 嬰兒同患腎病疑因喝‘三鹿’奶粉所致” (Gansu 14 ying’er tonghuan shenbing yiyin he “Sanlu” naifen suozhi, 14 babies in Gansu suffering from kidney stones after drinking “Sanlu” powdered milk), *Dongfang Zaobao*, 11 September 2008, news.sina.com.cn/c/2008-09-11/030414432835s.shtml (accessed on 12 July 2018).

32. This figure represents the number of copies printed. It is not possible to distinguish between the copies sold and those distributed without charge. These “internal” figures are clearly lower by half than those published by the paper, which were exaggerated with the aim of attracting advertisers.

33. “安徽司法惡例：被害人父親法院自盡，被告無罪死刑” (Anhui sifa eli: beihairen fuqin fayuan zijin, beigao wu zui bian siling, Strange judicial affair in Anhui: The father of the victim commits suicide in court, the accused, originally acquitted is then condemned to death), *Pengpai*, 22 July 2014, www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1256495 (consulted on 12 July 2018).

34. “黑龍江一監獄獄長警收錢，默許犯人与警察妻子在值班室發生關係” (Heilongjiang, a prison warder accepted money and permitted a relationship between a prisoner and the wife of a police officer in the office), *Pengpai*, 21 January 2015, www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1296443 (accessed on 12 July 2018).

35. “Internal” figures provided by *Pengpai*.

36. Interview with the author on 28 August 2017.

37. Interview with the author on 22 October 2015.

38. Interview with the author on 22 October 2015.

In the course of an asymmetric game with the authorities, the journalists from *Dongfang Zaobao* and *Pengpai* exploited some “zones of uncertainty” and chalked up some substantial gains in the field of investigation. In exchange, they refrained from investigating subjects declared taboo by the authorities. Considered acceptable by the journalists provided the asymmetric game allowed them to publish original investigations, the situation became unbearable for them when the authorities tightened their control over information.

In the end, the losses exceeded the gains

The journalists were proud of their investigations because they fulfilled a part of their professional and personal ambitions. There were even times when the national authorities took up problems revealed by the media and solved them. However, the ratings success achieved through the publication of investigative articles was accompanied by a secondary effect: it drew increased attention from the censors.

The editorial autonomy granted to the journalists of *Dongfang Zaobao* and *Pengpai* had always been precarious. At any moment the authorities could take back the editorial space conceded when the media were created. In the absence of legislation on the press, an independent justice system, and separation of state and Party, it could not be otherwise.

The editorial space granted to *Dongfang Zaobao* was reduced twice; in 2003 and in 2011. The first backlash was felt following its initiatives in the summer of 2003. From the point of view of the Shanghai authorities, *Dongfang Zaobao* was not entitled to assume the role of local counterpower. It had to be prevented from investigating municipal affairs, especially since it was linked to a press group in Guangdong Province. So it was that on an undetermined date in summer 2003, the Shanghai municipal authorities demanded the departure of Shen Hao and that the Wenxin Press Group take control of the newsroom of *Dongfang Zaobao*.³⁹ This reining in preceded the repression suffered by *Nanfang Dushibao* in 2004, after the Sun Zhigang affair.⁴⁰ It is similar to the banishing of other newspaper editors in the Nanfang Press Group: for example that of Qian Gang, editor-in-chief of the weekly *Nanfang Zhoumo* in 2001, and that of Yang Bin, editor-in-chief of the daily *Xinjingbao* in 2005.

Most of the journalists who came to Shanghai with Shen Hao remained, but the percentage of investigative reports published by *Dongfang Zaobao* fell sharply: whilst they represented 5% of the frontpage headlines in 2003 during the first weeks of the paper's existence, by October the figure had fallen to 1% and to 0% in 2007. The gag was evident in the case of Chen Liangyu 陳良宇, the head of the Shanghai Communist Party committee, arrested for misappropriation of funds on 25 September 2006. *Dongfang Zaobao* only published official press releases on the subject although its journalists knew a year before Chen Liangyu's arrest that he was in the sights of the Party's Disciplinary Committee. It was only in 2008 that the paper revived, taking advantage of the relative political relaxation as the Beijing Olympic Games drew nearer as well as a year full of news: the Sichuan earthquake and the milk powder affair.

The paper achieved its last great coups in 2011. It seized the occasion of a discussion on the Government's plan for the management of the negative effects of the Three Gorges Dam (*Sanxia daba* 三峽大壩) to publish, on 31 May, 12 pages of investigations into the environmental and social consequences of its construction.⁴¹ A photo of Huang Wanli 黃萬里, a professor at Tsinghua University who in 1957 had opposed the construction of an older dam, the Sanmenxia Dam (*Samenxia daba* 三門峽大壩), and

was consequently accused of being a Rightist, was placed on the front page. In the 1980s, Huang Wanli also opposed the building of the Three Gorges Dam. This kind of editorial audacity illustrates how journalists “play with the boundaries” (*da cabianqiu* 打擦邊球) – in the same way as a table tennis player aims at the edge of the table in order to score a point.

But after the Wenzhou train accident on 23 July 2011, the authorities' fear that the Arab Spring rebellions would spread led to a second round of constraints on the paper. Some of the management team tried to oppose this, but in vain. In mid-July 2012, the editor, Lu Yan 陸炎, and the deputy editor-in-chief, Sun Jian 孫鑒, were relieved of their duties. These dismissals contributed to the decision by Jian Guangzhou 簡光洲, the author of the contaminated milk powder investigation, to resign from the paper: “The ideal is dead, I am leaving,” he wrote on his Weibo account in September 2012.⁴²

Unlike *Dongfang Zaobao*, *Pengpai* never dared investigate the affairs of the Shanghai municipal authorities. During the stampede that claimed 36 lives in the Bund district on 31 December 2014 during the New Year celebrations, *Pengpai* limited itself to official press releases and individual eyewitness accounts. It was the Guangzhou and Beijing media who published enquiries that highlighted the responsibility of the Shanghai authorities.

As for national news, *Pengpai* devoted its main story each day to Xi Jinping, though never taking a critical stand. It promoted the nickname Uncle Xi (*Xi Dada* 習大大). The term appeared 128 times in the headlines in 2015. Despite this fawning, the chance to practise investigative journalism had diminished. The key moment was the censoring of a new enquiry into the Three Gorges Dam. As a continuation of the work done in 2011 by *Dongfang Zaobao*, on 21 July 2015, *Pengpai* published a three-part enquiry into the ecological, economic, and social impact of the construction of the dam.⁴³ The fruit of almost a year's work, the enquiry was censored several hours after its publication. This did not prevent the *Pengpai* management from paying a bonus of 20,000 *yuan* to the authors of the enquiry by virtue of its “remarkable social response.”⁴⁴ “We are the victims of our own success,” observed a *Pengpai* editor at the end of 2015.

With time, the CAC protection that had benefitted *Pengpai* in the early days became less effective. The local authorities complained to the CAC about the bad publicity the media gave the Communist Party. For example, although *Pengpai* once more succeeded in publishing, on 18 March 2016, an enquiry into a scandal of non-refrigerated vaccine, the Department of Propaganda forbade other media to reproduce it, although it had previously encouraged them to do so in the case of earlier scandals revealed by the online media.⁴⁵

39. Shen Hao then took over the management of the 21 *Shiji Jingji Baodao* until his arrest for extortion and blackmail in September 2014. He was forced to make a televised confession on 20 November 2014 and condemned to four years in prison in December 2015.

40. Editor-in-chief of the *Nanfang Dushibao* during the Sun Zhigang affair, on 25 April 2003, Cheng Yizhong 程益中 was arrested in March 2004.

41. “三峽五大疑問現場報告” (Sanxia wu da yiwen xianchang baogao, In-the-field report on the five big questions surrounding the Three Gorges), *Dongfang Zaobao*, 31 May 2011, www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1243512 (accessed on 12 July 2018).

42. The message can no longer be found on Weibo, but Jian Guangzhou confirmed its authenticity to the author.

43. “三峽” (Sanxia, Three Gorges), *Pengpai*, 21 July 2015 (personal archives, the online page has been removed).

44. The author's own account, October 2015.

45. “數億元疫苗未冷藏流入18省份：或影響人命，山東廣發協查函” (Shu yi yuan yimiao wei lengcang liuru 18 shengfen: huo yingxiang renming, Shandong guangfa xiecha han, Hundreds of millions of yuan's worth of non-refrigerated vaccines distributed in 18 provinces: Possible life-threatening consequences for humans, Shandong Province attempts to trace the vaccines), *Pengpai*, 18 March 2016, www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1445232 (accessed on 12 July 2018).

In the autumn of 2015, the journalists could not help but notice that, as this analysis by a department head shows:

Our space had once again been reduced. During the launch of *Pengpai*, the authorities and journalists had one objective in common: to create a new media to compensate for the decline of traditional newspapers and gain greater influence. But in the medium term our differences grew more marked: the authorities wanted a strong media over which they could exercise maximum control, whilst the journalists wanted a strong media in which they could control the information disseminated. These two objectives do not totally overlap.⁴⁶

Conclusions

The interviews with a stable group of journalists driven by worthy professional ambitions shed light on the reasons they negotiated with the authorities for the creation of two media outlets and on the manner in which they oriented their editorial teams. They revealed the strategy of the journalists within a context limited by censorship. The journalists themselves see their relationship with the authorities as a game. "It's like a game of chess. The players move their pieces and react to the moves of their opponents. If the authorities move a piece over there, we move ours over here," says a deputy editor-in-chief.⁴⁷ The game cannot take place unless the journalists accept the principle of the control of the authorities over information and if the latter grant them the right to investigate in exchange. When these conditions are met, the game becomes an acceptable means for journalists to combine a dose of freedom with the constraints of the censorship system.

As a result, the strategy of the *Dongfang Zaobao* and *Pengpai* journalists allowed them to publish enquiries into important economic and social problems and on the malfunctions of local policies. These gains earned them a flattering image as defenders of justice and truth. Yet the authorities were not losers, for all that, on the one hand, because the journalists always avoided taboo subjects, and on the other, because the journalists' enquiries allowed the central authorities to intervene more rapidly in dealing with local malfunctions. But above all, the authorities retained the power to censor the media when the journalists were bold enough to investigate sensitive subjects such as the consequences of the Three Gorges Dam. The authorities thereby ensured that the game would remain asymmetric.

The resignation of Jian Guangzhou from *Dongfang Zaobao* in 2012 and the censoring of the report on the Three Gorges Dam in *Pengpai* in 2015 made journalists aware that their editorial freedom was contracting and that their losses were exceeding their gains. But they drew different conclusions. No longer believing it at all possible to work in accordance with his ideal, Jian Guangzhou left journalism to direct a communications agency.⁴⁸ However, most of his former colleagues decided to persevere. On 2 November 2016, after resigning from *Pengpai*, they launched a third media organisation: *Lishipin* (梨視頻, *Pear Video*), a news site specialising in video.⁴⁹

The long-term observation of the relationships between this group of journalists and the authorities would suggest that we move away from a vision that focuses solely on censorship or on a head-on refusal of it. Although these realities are essential for an understanding of the way news is put together in China, they do not give a complete account of "the strange and tense love triangle between party control, commercialisation and professional journalism" (Bandurski 2008: 116). Part of this enigma resides in the fact that journalists believe it possible to realise their professional

ambitions, in part at least, within a system whose idea of information they nonetheless do not share. The fact that a single group of journalists persevered in this belief for more than a decade, and despite disillusionments, underlines its deep rootedness. It is a belief that contributes to the dynamism of the Chinese news media that would be difficult to explain were it not for a strong dose of voluntary commitment on the part of these principal actors. Moreover, nothing permits us to state that these journalists had the hidden intention to undermine the control of the Party over the news media. Their actions, like their declarations, indicate that they believed instead in the possibility of a *modus vivendi* with the authorities that corresponded to both the principles of socialist information and their own professional aspirations. This belief helped them to accept the limitations placed on their right to inform the public in the hope that little by little they could enlarge their editorial space and tackle truths that were still taboo. This proved illusory, even more so under the mandate of Xi Jinping, who reminded journalists that "the media's name is the Communist Party" (*meiti xing dang 媒體姓黨*).⁵⁰

■ Translated by Elizabeth Guill.

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46. Interview with the author on 19 October 2015.

47. Interview with the author on 22 October 2015.

48. Many investigative journalists left the media during the 2010s, including Deng Fei and Wang Keqin.

49. *Lishipin* 梨視頻, www.pearvideo.com (accessed on 31 May 2019).

50. Declaration made by Xi Jinping, on 18 February 2016, during a visit to *People's Daily*, the new China News Agency, and China Central Television, CCTV.

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