

QUO VADIS, CHINA?

Since 2003, the **China Media Project** at the **University of Hong Kong** has been working with editors, writers and producers from various media in China to analyze the process of media reform in China. The project is directed by veteran Chinese journalist Qian Gang. We spoke to editor and film maker **David Bandurski** who has been involved as researcher in the project for six years now – how do they get inside China's media?

An important part of our project is our fellows programme - journalists from China from all sorts of backgrounds. We put them together in a closed door session and we talk about what they were facing in China – for example how they reported a particular case, say official corruption, what dangers they faced, what challenges.

We get a glimpse in these sessions with our visiting fellows how the environment is changing, how journalism and media actually work in China. We can't share everything that we glean from these meetings, there is a level of respect and protection towards the fellows as obviously talking about some of these things can be quite sensitive. A lot of people would think that investigative journalism does not exist in China because we hear about the controls. But in fact it does.

How are China's domestic media changing?

If we talk about China's media sector as an industry at all, it is not until the 1990s that this happened. Even the word 'media industry' was not used in the mid-90s, that gives you an idea how young Chinese media are.

You have party newspapers in the mid-90s, they have their own commercial spin-offs, newspapers that have to sell advertising to survive. Not only do they not get subsidies from the government but they have to pay a large portion of their profit to the party publications that run them. In that way they are tied into the party press apparatus in China, and this is how they are politically controlled.

On the other hand, they are no longer simply beholden to their party masters, they have readerships. So you have in the late 90s the reader, the media consumer, actually emerging as a force in China. Within this process of commercialisation as we call it we

have a number of other changes in the late 90s. We have the beginning of the internet in China, especially after 2003 it is really taking off. And the third factor is professional journalism in China's media.

So while the party is emphasising the role of journalists as press workers for the party, they think of themselves as working for the public interest. They are responding to readers and giving them coverage.

What's happening in radio and TV?

China National Radio, the state radio network has quite a robust website but radio is a difficult medium to track. Radio and TV are perceived differently from the print media. They are often more sensitive because they are seen as having a real mass reach, and that's particularly true for TV. The interesting changes we have seen in TV have been party media like China Central TV moving along the axis towards commercial content, encouraged as a matter of policy by the party.

The move to make content more relevant, we have seen that across the board in TV. And then we have seen the emergence of regional TV interest, like Hunan TV for example. Hunan TV played this game of getting smart about the provision of commercial content but completely avoiding content like news that could get them into this murkier area of media control, and they were quite successful. They were the first to introduce programmes like *Supergirl* - a kind of American Idol of China.

Each time we saw CCTV hurrying to catch up and to copy these commercially viable programmes. In the last couple of years we have had a lot of these new dating programmes in China that were largely very successful, but since the July 2010 politbureau session the leadership is moving to crack down on these kinds of programmes which are seen as very low-brow, over the top and over-commercialised as well as in some cases maybe a little bit politically



dangerous. *Supergirl* had a voting just like *American Idol* which presented a real problem for that programme. So we have a moral crusade since July that has affected TV programmes.

Right now journalists are a major public nuisance in our country

Peking University professor Kong Qingdong (孔庆东) during a November 2010 interview in which he singled media in Guangdong out for criticism

What are audiences looking for?

I would say that the Chinese media consumers are hungrier for information just about than any population you can imagine, and part of this is that they have been denied information for so long. You have got this interesting picture where you have a very controlled media environment in China but in spite of that you have got incredible growth. They are of course looking for lifestyle coverage and consumer coverage, they are looking for local news, this is what the commercial newspapers specialise in.

So for Guangdong near Hong Kong you have *Nantong Daily* with news about the leaders, you get these pieces that are very dry about policy announcements – the information is not made relevant or even understandable for the average person. And then you have

▲ Catching up on the news on the Shanghai metro

◀ FACING PAGE: A haunting image of the effects of pollution in China, by award-winning photographer Lu Guang

commercial newspapers, they have millions of readers, they are providing whole sections on consumer products, on local daily news, they have reporters on the beat covering crime. The growth story in China is the explosion of social problems and social tensions.

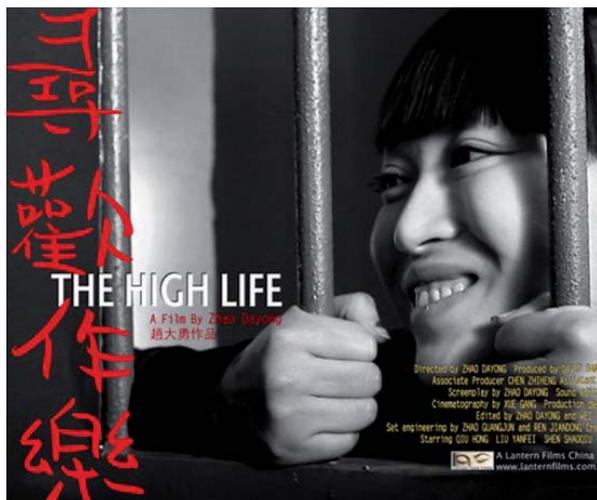
There are still so many issues that are either impossible or difficult to talk about but are of immediate importance. Issues like food safety, environmental problems, epidemic diseases. This is why the internet has taken off. It has also created the world's biggest rumour mill because the information is closed on the one hand but there are still all kinds of rumours and unconfirmed information and people consume it because they want to know.

How does the internet work in China?

You have to understand that the major internet portals just aggregate all the editorial from the major newspapers of the day. There is no news on these portals that is released by the site itself because they are prohibited from having their own news outfit. You don't really have online journalism happening except the citizen journalism or bloggers who are unofficially reporting news, which is another issue.

But what we see happening with the internet portal is that you have a local story – for example children

“ That gives you an idea of what would happen if there is a relaxation ”



being severely poisoned by emissions from local factories – reported by a commercial spin-off of a provincial level party newspaper and then picked up by the internet portal and making it a national story. The provincial party paper, the mother paper of that commercial paper, never reported that news. They kept silent.

So you get this circular thing happening with reporting where you might have a local story about environmental destruction or such like, then it is reported on a forum, then a local or national newspaper will find it and then they will go and do their own reporting on the story. And then that again will go through the major web portals and be consumed across the country, commented on and shared, even on Twitter which is blocked in China but is still quite actively used by elites.

How do people share videos?

The online video has been a particularly sensitive area. One thing the leadership has done recently is to put the new media into the hands of trusted party allies, so they are more than happy for CCTV to get into the online video business.

There were about a million websites shut down in China in 2009, it was a very bloody year for China's internet industry. There were a lot of small and medium sized websites, many of them were legitimate start-up websites that

▲ Poster for *The High Life*, produced by David Bandurski

“ Really getting into China's media industry is a pipe-dream right now ”

<http://cmp.hku.hk>



were getting into areas like online video. Many of them could never get back on their feet and that was the whole point. We see a lot of investment in areas like online video by party media, for example People's Daily Online, the web version of *People's Daily*, is a massive site, there is a lot of investment in it. That's a double standard - the commercial internet portals in China can't have their own reporting team, but *People's Daily* can. This is partly an effort to push the party media into a kind of position of strength on the internet.

What about content in English?

The English language content in China is for consumption by foreigners to project an image of China. You will have elites that consume English language content.

The key part there is not the consumption of the English language content itself, it is the way it is shared through forums like Twitter. Now you have Twitter and micro blogs in China that pass around this information from foreign language media reporting on issues that are not covered in China and they are sharing them in Chinese language through these social media in China.

The mobile phone – how is it used?

Definitely multimedia content is the direction. Mobile phones are used actively by journalists and we see a lot of interesting citizen journalism as well, networking on topics of interest or irritation, like the building of these extravagant local government buildings in China. Citizens have the power to build up the story, and a lot of this is being done by mobile phone.

What are the opportunities for foreign media coming into China?

Media consultancies might give you more specific answers on the opportunities available, but in terms of content, really getting into China's media industry is impossible. It's a pipedream right now.

News is definitely an area that is completely closed to foreign media

players. Someone could tell you which little hoops to leap through and for certain types of companies, yes, they can find some opportunities, but thinking broadly this massive media market is not going to materialise. I hear there is a lot of activity on consulting. If you have experience at Al Jazeera or the BBC and can advise the central party media on their strategy in creating international media, there is more interest in your services.

What's happening with HD, 3D?

The film industry in China is definitely looking at 3D because they are always looking at what is happening overseas – unfortunately in a kind of imitation mode.

The problem is all the film production money is state controlled. Many of the young generation of film makers produce unofficial, unapproved films and show them at festivals around the world. But the tragedy is they can't access their own domestic Chinese audience because of political control.

We see more and more use of HD in China in the hands of academics who are making documentaries. You have quite an interesting independent movement in terms of the sheer number of people involved. They are finding ways to finance their own projects, they are going out with Apple Pro and Final Cut and make their own film. That gives you an idea of what would happen if there is a relaxation.

What is on your wishlist for China?

The issue of accessing information and free speech has become absolutely critical now for China. My wish would be that China can move towards political reform and part of that political reform should be opening up the media. China's press is a lot better than we give it credit for. A lot of coverage that we get on China in the foreign media actually begins in the Chinese media – the media have advanced within control. It's an incremental process. I am hopeful.

David Bandurski, thank you.