

Public health crises on Chinese front pages – An analysis of media
discourses about SARS and the tainted milk scandal

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Summary

This paper seeks to explore the impact the two national health crises - SARS and the tainted milk scandal - might have had on the public sphere in China. In both cases, insufficient information and government cover-ups hindered effective handling of the situations and worsened the outcome.

Against the backdrop of recent history and developments within Chinese media, I analysed how the official party-paper, the Renmin Ribao, and the Guangdong-based weekly Nanfang Zhoumo covered the two crises. By doing so, I was able to study the relationship between official and more liberal discourses and how these developed over time in the context of crises.

In my analysis I paid special attention to different groups' degree of access to the debate and to which topics that were discussed. When examining the use of language in the discourses, I observed how the terms "scientific" and "openness" were applied in the rhetoric of leaders in 2003 and 2008. I also found several examples of how government critique was raised between the lines in the Nanfang Zhoumo.

I argue in my paper that the crises have contributed to a widening public sphere in terms of topics that are acceptable to discuss within the limits of censorship. At the same time, the Chinese leadership has adopted a more proactive and humble approach to crisis management, something that might strengthen the Party's position in terms of legitimacy as well as its ability to carry out unpopular reforms on the local level.

In order to acquire a broader understanding of the dynamics of a public sphere in an East-Asian regional context, I looked at how national media covered a similar crisis in South Korea. I found that commercial pressure and strong nationalist sentiments could put a critical public debate at risk also in a democratic country where media is not owned and controlled by the government.

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The responsibility for the final product is fully mine, but their efforts certainly made it a better one.

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Introduction – topic and questions

“I feel extremely guilty and sincerely apologize to all of you.”¹ These were the words of Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao to China and the rest of the world when the scope of the “tainted milk scandal” became evident in October 2008. Wen's words were a rare incident of a high government official accounting for his actions in a leadership that seldom answers to critique and that works hard to prevent for channels of public critique to emerge.

51 900² infants were hospitalised for various kidney problems³ related to the consumption of contaminated baby formula, where the industrial chemical melamine had been added to make the protein level look higher. Six deaths among infants were confirmed in Mainland China. Non-fatal cases were reported in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, and products containing melamine were found in many other countries. Altogether 300 000 babies are believed to have been sickened by the milk formula.

In 2003, Wen offered similar apologies after China had not informed the World Health Organisation (WHO) about an outbreak of the deadly SARS-virus in November 2002 in the southern Guangdong-province until four months later, causing a delay in the response to the epidemic. The two scandals are similar in that they brought national shame to China, highlighted serious shortcomings in the system and its governance and represented a direct threat to the people's health.

In this paper, I will examine how two Chinese newspapers covered these scandals. In both cases, poor information systems combined with intentional cover ups made the situations worse and finally led to top leaders being held accountable and leaving their posts, to calls for better supervision, regulation and more openness.

My aim is to consider what implications these incidents and the reporting on them may have had on the public sphere in China. Who were given a voice in the papers? What topics were addressed and which words were used? In what way did official and liberal newspapers differ in their coverage? By looking at these two cases, one from the early years of the decade and the other toward the end, I hope to be able to say something about the development within the public sphere over this period of time.

¹ Asia Times, October 10, 2008: “Milk scandal sours China's ‘soft power’”.

² WHO's official homepage.

³ Including kidney stones that are very rare to find among infants, according to the WHO.

The limitations of my paper

In order to stay within the scope of my paper, I will focus on the reporting in the initial phases (characterised by silence or censorship), the breakthroughs (when official information is released) and the first days after the breakthroughs. Such an approach will be instrumental in observing the relationship between openness and censorship in a crucial phase. The papers I have taken my material from, the Renmin Ribao and the Nanfang Zhoumo, are not chosen to reflect the general picture of how Chinese media covered these events, but rather they serve as two extremes on a continuum between strictly official and more liberal papers.

I believe that comparing these newspapers will be useful in observing the limits on public discourse as well as the relationship between the official and more liberal discourse. On sensitive issues, the Renmin Ribao together with the official news agency Xinhua set the standard for how to report within the limits of censorship. In the same cases, the Nanfang Zhoumo and other more liberal publications use clever methods to push the limits.

Theory

Public sphere

In his book *The structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, German sociologist Jürgen Habermas describes an ideal situation where the public exercises influence over other institutions through rational debate in the public sphere. At the core of his theory is the idea that legitimate rule must build on an argumentative discourse and that power lies exclusively in the best argument.⁴

There are three objective demands for a public sphere: a disinterest in the participants' statuses, that themes of common concern are debated and new themes brought into the light and that the forum in which the debate takes place is inclusive to all members of society.⁵ The public sphere is on the one hand separated from the private sphere of the family and on the other from the sphere of public authority (the state).

Habermas claims that those conditions were closest to be present in the cafés and saloons in England and France in the eighteenth century, but that they eroded in the

⁴ Habermas 1989.

⁵ Habermas 1989:36f

centuries to come due to capitalist hegemony over labour and mass media's submission to private or state privileged interest.⁶

Newspapers were attributed a special role in stimulating the emergence of the public sphere in the late seventeenth century. At this time, critical journals and moral weeklies, increasingly concerned with issues of general social and political significance, emerged parallel to the saloons and provided a new forum for the conduct of public debate.⁷ In the social-democratic welfare state, however, Habermas argues that the newspapers have been given institutional guarantees and thereby moved into the political sphere of the state. At the same time, private interest, organised in interest organisations and political parties, has moved into the public sphere, where these interests are put to the fore through the work of professional public relation officers. The result is a "re-feudalisation of the public sphere," a situation characterised by display of private interest before a mass audience more or less interested in politics.

Habermas's theory has been described as groundbreaking and been influential in the study of civic life. It has nevertheless met much critique, among others, from Schudson. He finds it "profoundly ahistorical and entirely insensitive to the ways in which intellectual and moral ideals of public life have themselves shifted over time."⁸ Schudson argues that such a public sphere never existed in the U.S., which has rather been going through periods of trust-based, party-based and rights-based models of citizenship.

John B. Thompson has also directed important critique to Habermas's theory. He claims it neglects the role of popular social movements of the period, that it has a too selective description of the character of the printed press and that it fails to take into account the implications of the restricted access to the public sphere for women and peasants⁹. Of special interest here, is his questioning of Habermas's conception of publicness and its normative implications. Thompson explains how the ideal situation where reason rules through an inclusive open debate is based on the idea that "individuals come together in a shared locale to engage in dialogue with one another as equal participants in a face-to-face conversation." He points to how it would be practically impossible today, in a world where actions may affect individuals who are widely dispersed in space and time, to carry out a debate where all affected could

⁶ Habermas 1989.

⁷ Thompson 1995

⁸ Schudson 1999:3

⁹ Thompson 1995:71-75

participate. “Millions would be reduced to silence while others spoke in their name, and the concerns of future generations would find no place on the agenda of the living,” he says, referring to the need for governments and international bodies to come to decisions on global issues such as environmental protection. Thompson concludes that “we must seek to develop a way of thinking about moral-practical issues which does justice to the new and historically unprecedented circumstances under which these issues arise today.”¹⁰

Having raised these important questions about Habermas’s concept, I nevertheless register how the critics successfully use it as a reference point in order to describe the current condition, as I will do here. Raymond Kuhn defines “public sphere” as an “institutional framework and set of practices which encourage wide and inclusive public debate about issues of social and political importance.”¹¹ I find this approach comprehensive, and will use this understanding of Habermas’s theory in this paper.

The fruitfulness of using the concept of a public sphere as an analytical tool when studying China has also been questioned, among others by Philip Huang. On the background of China’s specific history of socio-political organisation, he argues for the need to “break out of the old conceptual habits of postulating a simple binary opposition between state and society” by studying what he calls the “third realm.”¹² The third realm consists of entities that grew out of the state-imposed organisation of society into segmented communes/brigades in agricultural areas and work units (*danwei* 单位) in the cities. Those were “tightly knit within themselves, but largely segmented from one another.”¹³¹⁴ Here, he argues, the state joins with society for public activities beyond the capacity of the formal bureaucratic apparatus. With a history of over four decades, these entities have operational logics on their own that are “distinct both from state agencies and private associations.”¹⁵

While acknowledging the value of studying the processes within such a third realm specific to the Chinese historical experience, I nevertheless think that there is no need to take off the “glasses” of Habermas and his public sphere to be able to do so.

¹⁰ Ibid 1995:263

¹¹ Kuhn in Randall 1998:24.

¹² Huang 1993.

¹³ Ibid 1993:237.

¹⁴ Perry and Lü (1997) have noted the “cellular” nature of the urban work units in the Mao-state. The *danwei* was utilised for political mobilisation, but also provided its workers with social benefits, such as housing, medical care and canteens. Bjorklund explains how the very physical construction of the *danweis*, with walls around them and buildings facing inwards, excludes outsiders and “at the same time provides a basis for integrating those within it into an effective social, economic and political unit.” (Bjorklund in Perry and Lü 1997)

¹⁵ Huang 1993:238.

Barret McCormick and Liu Qing point to the contradiction in Habermas's theory that on the one hand, he says the public sphere is a "historical category," but on the other hand, he uses it as a "normative concept to express ideals of openness, equality and reasoned debate." They argue that Habermas himself opened for a wider usage and that it empirically speaking could be several public spheres, among them which the "liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere" is relatively close to the ideal type.¹⁶

Facing the critics, McCormick and Liu first argue that Habermas's ideas are no less problematic when empirically applied to the West than to China, as his claim regarding the development of a public sphere in early modern Europe has not withstood empirical scrutiny. Secondly, they remark that as no society has reached Habermas's ideal public sphere, it would be "orientalist" to claim that values such as open and reasoned debate are essential characteristics to Western societies, but not to the East¹⁷.

Applying this approach to Habermas's theory, I believe it is possible to use the public sphere as both an empirical and normative analytical tool when studying China. One might empirically study the institutions and other spaces where a public debate is carried out. Doing that, factors such as legal framework of the press, degrees of editorial independence, censorship, the degree of access to the debate and which topics are being discussed will be useful measures to consider, as I will do here.

The idea that Habermas's liberal public sphere embodies remains central to democratic theory.¹⁸ When discussing China using Habermas's concept, many have sought to consider the political implications changes in the public sphere might have for a democratic transformation in the country. This will not be the main focus in this paper, although I will comment upon it in my concluding notes.

Method and material

The papers I have collected my material of altogether 352 articles from are the Renmin Ribao (人民日报), which is the national official party organ of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and the Nanfang Zhoumo (南方周末), a weekly with its main distribution in Guangzhou.¹⁹ I will give a fuller presentation of these two papers below.

¹⁶ McCormick and Liu 2011:13.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ McCarthy in Habermas 1989.

¹⁹ I collected the material at the National Library of China's (国家图书馆) archive of newspapers in Beijing.

Who has a say? A quantitative and qualitative inquiry

With a theoretical base in the Habermasian theory of the public sphere, I have chosen to put a special attention to inclusiveness to the discourse and to what topics are brought into the spotlight. When I read the articles, I counted and registered the sources the papers had used (See table 1 and 2). The question of whose voices a paper chose to carry in its columns is crucial to understand the editorial policy of the paper and the nature of censorship.

Yuezhi Zhao has noted the lack of voice by several groups of people in the Chinese news media. In her study of the media discourse about China's WTO membership, she finds that in spite of the impact a membership would have on their lives, neither a single worker nor a farmer was interviewed in the entire coverage.²⁰

A muted group is of course a strong indication of an unequal power relation. At the same time, the groups who do get to speak are not necessarily powerful just because they are given access to the discourse. Interviews and other texts are edited according to what the journalists and editors want for the final story and to the formal and informal rules of reporting. As a result, arguments can be broken up or taken out of context and important aspects can be omitted. A participant in the debate may also speak the case of another person or group. For example, a journalist may speak the case of the consumers. These variations will not be reflected in my numbers and will therefore be given additional attention in the analyses of the texts.²¹

Discourse analysis

In order to expand my analysis, I looked closely at what kind of language and terms were used in my material.

The concept of critical discourse analysis (CDA) was developed by, among others, Robert Fairclough and Ruth Wodak at the beginning of the 1990s. It is not seen as a method or theory on its own, but rather as an interdisciplinary approach, or a "school," that systematically takes into account the structures of socio-political context. In their book *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, Wodak and Meyer define CDA as

being fundamentally interested in analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language.

²⁰ Zhao in Lee 2003:44.

²¹ All in all, the numbers are of secondary importance, but they may support some of the arguments I will make and help provide a clearer impression of the two papers.

In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, constituted, legitimized, and so on, by language use (or in discourse.)²²

A good example of a study with a CDA approach is found in Yew-Jin Fang's analysis of how official newspapers on Mainland China (the People's Daily) and Taiwan (the Central Daily News) covered social unrest in South Africa and Argentina at the middle and the end of the 1980s.

In her analysis, Fang examines the main lexical choices the journalists had made when writing about the events. She then looks at the choice of headlines and themes in order to see what topics the paper had prioritised. Next, she looks at actor roles, quotations and news sources and finally she carries out a grammatical analysis with a focus on transitivity. The latter shows how the roles of different participants are being downplayed or highlighted in any given situation.

Parallel to the detailed analysis of language, she considers the relations between her findings in the texts and the larger socio-political context of the day. In the beginning of her paper, she explains that in the 1980s, the ruling regimes in the PRC and the ROC both strived for greater diplomatic recognition as the legitimate Chinese government by the international community. The white South African government maintained friendly diplomatic relations with the ROC government, but not with the PRC government.

In her case study of the South African civil unrest in March 1985, Fang finds that the journalists' choice of words, headlines, themes, sources and grammar to a large extent serve to support their respective regimes political needs of the day. For example, the People's Daily mostly used anti-apartheid sources whereas the Central Daily News gave a strong voice to the South African government and police sources. Looking at the grammar, she found that the People's Daily made extensive use of transitive sentences to highlight the active role of the police in the killings of the demonstrators.

When turning to the case of Argentina and the spring of 1989, however, she notifies the convergence in presentation of the event in the two papers, something she attests to a different diplomatic climate and thus different needs of the leaders.

In this paper, I will follow a CDA-approach where I critically consider my material in light of the socio-political context, as in the example above. As my main focus is on the different phases of reporting, I chose to follow the timeline of the coverage closely and include all published material, rather than analysing a few articles in great detail.

²² Wodak and Meyer 2009:10

Regional perspective

To provide for a regional comparative perspective, I will look shortly at my two cases in the light of how a similar national crisis in South Korea was covered by the media there. I have chosen to look at the case of the once internationally recognised stem cell scientist Hwang Woo-suk, who was accused of having broken international research ethics and later of having fabricated data for his research. I will not go into depth on this case; my aim is rather to show what implications a similar event had on the public sphere in another East-Asian country with a different media system.

Background

Chinese media today: new powers, control and commercialism

Through the overshadowing authority of the Party's Propaganda Department, the Communist Party of China (CPC) still has control over the media, both in terms of ownership and content. But, there have been significant changes in the Chinese media landscape during the past 30 years, and most media enterprises have been thrown into the market to become profit-making actors. As a result, consumers have gotten considerable influence over the way the media develops. In order to sell their products, media houses have reoriented to include profit making as one of their organisational goals.²³ One result of this is that a liberalisation in terms of topics has taken place, and many have discussed the political implications of discourses that carry values such as individualism, consumerism and scepticism of authority being articulated in music television, soap operas and weekend consumer reports.²⁴

McCormick and Liu argue that even though this commercial culture is often apolitical, it "may nonetheless undermine the traditional relationship between political authorities and the public."²⁵ Others have claimed that in a Chinese context, commercialisation has led to a more open debate through a focus on individuals and things that are relevant to their lives. Hallain says the fact that the experience of ordinary people is increasingly the prime source of evidence and value in the news would seem to be an "important symbol of a shift towards a democratic political culture."²⁶ Yuezhi Zhao has observed how this trend influences the reporting of scandals,

²³ Ma in Curran and Park (eds.) 2000:22.

²⁴ Ma in Curran and Park (eds.) 2000:31.

²⁵ McCormick and Liu in Lee 2003:139.

²⁶ Hallain in McCormick and Liu in Lee 2003:154.

saying that “there is considerable market for scandals, but scandals are far more likely to be presented in terms of an individual with moral problems than a systemic failure.”²⁷

The opening up policy and the strong focus of economic progress has made the economic elite and the middle class new powers in the Chinese society.²⁸ This has had its impact on media as well as most other aspects of Chinese society. Yuezhi Zhao sums up this transformation:

The Chinese media system is increasingly becoming a platform for profit making while speaking in the voice of the ruling Party elite and the rising business and urban middle classes who are the domestic and international capital most wanted audiences.²⁹

She notes how the publishing of a successful business story simultaneously is a story about the success of the Party’s economic reform program and its ideology for openness. She further argues that what may seem to be a paradox in the new Chinese media system – persistence of control in the political domain and liberalisation in the economic and lifestyle spheres – may as well be considered two sides of the same coin that serves the interest of the political and economic elite.³⁰

The roles of the Chinese journalist

Before 1979, Chinese media was “both the mouth and tongue and the eyes and ears of China as embodied in the Chinese Communist Party.”³¹ In spite of marketisation, the role of the Chinese journalist remains close to that of a state information worker.

Many have argued that this situation is not exclusive to the post 1949 experience, but that “there is little tradition of impartial or objective media, a ‘fourth estate’ role for the media or, even, professional independence in journalism”³² in China. According to a traditional Chinese view, media is an instrument for use by those who control it.³³

A passage in a commentary written by an unnamed journalist in the Renmin Ribao during the SARS-period illustrates this role:

News media has already done substantial work spreading knowledge about how to prevent and cure SARS, and there is still much work left. Media must, according to changes in the epidemic situation and according to the needs of the cadres and the

²⁷ Zhao 2000 in McComrick and Liu in Lee 2003.

²⁸ Zhao in Thomas and Nain (eds.) 2004.

²⁹ Zhao in Thomas and Nain (eds.) 2004:205.

³⁰ Zhao in Thomas and Nain (eds.) 2004:188.

³¹ Cullen and Hua in Randall 1998:161

³² Kuldip in Cullen and Hua in Randall 1998:163.

³³ Cullen and Hua in Randall 1998:163.

people, continue to carry out the work of making known the scientific knowledge of preventing and curing the disease.³⁴

That being said, the professional identity of the Chinese journalist is neither one-sided nor cut in stone. When examining discourses of journalistic ideals among journalists in China, Zhongdang Pan and Ye Lu found four different discourses: that of the party press, Confucian intellectuals, professionalism and market economy.³⁵ The principles of journalistic practices in the party press discourse are “loyalty to the Party, consistency with Party lines and observant of the Party’s discipline.” In the discourse of the Confucian intellectuals it is “speaking the truth, sticking to facts and being open to new ideas.” In the professionalism discourse, “objectivity, autonomy and rationality” are the guiding principles and in the market economy one “being well received by the public in the form of ratings, circulations and ad revenues”³⁶ is crucial goals. The authors underline that in their daily work, diverse and often conflicting ideas of journalism are being utilised and appropriated through journalists’ improvised and situated practices.³⁷

The exposure of corruption is a task that the Party has given to journalists, as the problem proved to be colossal also within official ranks. The term “professionalism” in the context of journalism was first used in an influential professional journal in 1999, where the author tried to connect “the Western notion of professionalism” to the Party’s call for media surveillance against corruption.³⁸ Today, the central authorities tolerate greater press openness on water and air pollution and food and medicine quality. These are problems that, if left unreported and unsolved, might stir up serious popular dissatisfaction. Veteran Journalist Zhan Jian remarks, however, that the central government tries to reassert control over media as soon as it has gotten the information “to cool off public emotions and convey an image of a competent government that is solving the problem.”³⁹

Elin Sæther has looked at the emerging trend of investigating journalism in China and found that while working within a state-owned media system, journalists seek to establish new spaces of representation by including previously absent perspective and

³⁴ Renmin Ribao: “Lean on science and firmly keep confidence” “依靠科学坚定信心”, April 24, 2003. (original text: 新闻媒体在普及防治非典型肺炎知识方面已经做了大量工作, 还有大量工作要做。要针对疫情变化和干部群众的要求, 继续做好科学防治知识的普及工作).

³⁵ Pan and Lu in Lee 2003.

³⁶ Ibid 2003:219

³⁷ Pan and Lu in Lee (ed.) 2003:215

³⁸ Pan and Lu in Lee (ed.) 2003.

³⁹ Zhan in Shirk 2011:20.

voices in the public sphere.⁴⁰ She shows how journalists write in system critique between the lines, for example how one journalist showed the failure of the government to control an illegal blood business that escalated the AIDS epidemic through telling the tragic personal story of an AIDS victim.⁴¹

Another development that has reshaped journalistic culture and the role of the journalist is the moving away from strictly fixed salaries from the government. From the 1990s, bonuses were regularised as "flexible wages" and distributed on basis of individual merit instead of political commitment and seniority as earlier practised.⁴² Economic incentives in form of story fees or good story cash awards has, according to Eric Kit-wai Ma, led to more aggressive journalists.⁴³

On the other hand, in the wake of marketisation, journalists all of a sudden found themselves in the prime nexus of exchange, where both public and commercial bodies paid them for political and economical favours.⁴⁴ Commercialisation of Chinese media, Ma sums up, involves highly manipulative relations between political powers, economic interests and pay journalism, which is in sharp contrast to a romanticised view of a democratic marketplace of ideas.⁴⁵

The role of globalisation and the Internet

Some have argued that Internet technology dooms authoritarian governments by its very nature.⁴⁶ So far, this has not been the case in China, although considerable resources are used to control the Internet. Apart from more traditional techniques for regulating the media, above all,

the authorities work to maintain an atmosphere of surveillance and implicit and explicit threats where those who work in the media will censor themselves rather than risk incurring unwanted official attention and punitive action.⁴⁷

The Internet has nevertheless changed the way information circulates in society, and it can be argued that it provides for a more open and meaningful debate on several fields.

McCormick and Liu have shown how the Internet quickly started to influence official discourse in China, even the Renmin Ribao. An explosion in a schoolhouse in

⁴⁰ Sæther 2008:4.

⁴¹ Sæther 2008: "Medias politiske rolle i Kina" (Radio lecture at P2-akademiet, Norwegian Broadcasting (NRK)).

⁴² Ma in Curran and Park (eds.) 2000:22.

⁴³ Ma in Curran and Park (eds.) 2000:23.

⁴⁴ Ma in Curran and Park (eds.) 2000:23.

⁴⁵ Ma in Curran and Park (eds.) 2000:26.

⁴⁶ McCormick and Liu in Lee 2003:142.

⁴⁷ McCormick and Liu in Lee (ed.) 2003:145.

Wanhai County in rural Jiangxi province in 2001 killed at least forty people. The official press early blamed an unknown man described by villagers as psychotic, that had allegedly come to the school with fireworks, fired it up, and left a suicide note. The scene was soon closed off, but a Hong Kong reporter managed to interview local residents using a local accent. He found out that due to poverty and corruption of local leaders, the villagers had been pressed to do dangerous work with fire works on an assembly line and that the explosives were stored at the school. The story spread through the Internet to Mainland China media, and even the Renmin Ribao reported on the new information in its online version.⁴⁸

After this information came out, then premier Zhu Rongji made an apology to the NPC, saying that the government would work to enforce rules that would avoid such tragedies in the future. This example shows how globalisation and new technology can influence policy and lead to at least a limited degree of accountability.

The example also serves to show that already by 2001, before the SARS outbreak, the influence of the Internet was visible in the Chinese media landscape. In 2001, China only had 26 million Internet users. Today it has 420 millions⁴⁹, and social media, such as blogs and chat rooms, has also made regular Chinese able to spread their own information about cases. Xiao Qiang argues that “the rise of online public opinion shows that the CPC and government can no longer maintain absolute control of the mass media and information.”⁵⁰ According to him the result is a power shift in Chinese society.

Official and unofficial ideologies – “scientific development” and nationalism

After Hu Jintao was inaugurated as President of the PRC on March 15th 2003, the concept of “scientific development,” (*kexue fazhan guan* 科学发展观,) together with that of building a “harmonious society,” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会,) soon became catchphrases for his leadership that signalled changes in policy from the former generation of leaders. Saich explains the new development strategy as one that “combine populist authoritarianism in the political realm with a shift in economic policy that focus more on the sustainability and quality of economic growth rather than its speed.”⁵¹ Parallel to his commitment to people and regions that had been left behind by economic reform, Saich notes that Hu from the beginning opted for a firmer grip on the public sphere. “In place

⁴⁸ McCormick and Liu in Lee (ed.) 2003:140ff.

⁴⁹ 中国互联网络信息中心 China Internet Network Information Centre's webpages.

⁵⁰ Xiao Qiang in Shirk 2011:15

⁵¹ Saich 2006:41.

of any significant reform, President Hu is offering cleaner and more efficient government administration,”⁵² he says in a summary written in 2005, the year Hu is believed to have fully consolidated his power. Discussing the development of “Hu thought,” Joseph Fewsmith claims that the first use of the phrase “scientific development concept” appears to have been by Hu Jintao during an inspection trip to Jiangxi Province in September 2003.⁵³ In light of this, it is interesting to see how the word “scientific” was used in a broader sense than the conventional meaning of the word already during the SARS outbreak in spring the same year in my material. McGee called those broad political terms ideographs:

An ideograph is an ordinary-language term found in political discourse. It is a high order abstraction representing commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal.⁵⁴

These potent terms, even though unclear, are used precisely to give the sense of a clearly understood and shared meaning. “Scientific development” and “Harmonious society” may be considered such ideographs and it is therefore needed to critically study how they are filled with meaning in particular contexts.

To understand media policy in China, it is necessary to understand the challenge posed by the demise of communism. The ideology that brought the CPC to power has lost its relevance, and the question of how to maintain legitimacy is a complicated and urgent one. Zhou He has remarked that the Chinese Communist state, which has turned itself into a bureaucratic capitalist system, is “endeavouring to work out how to fit into the global system and legitimise its mandate to rule derived from a Communist revolution that has lost its popular following.”⁵⁵ Nationalism has been one of the answers to this challenge. But rather than a new moral banner, the patriotic sentiment of nationalism has been an:

effective glue to an otherwise fragmented nation and an emotion that could be cunningly manipulated to serve state power, thus becoming a catch-all ideological artefact for most of the spiritual discourse in the country.⁵⁶

To evoke sentiments of nationalism, it is often referred to how China has been wronged by colonial powers in the past, especially during the Opium Wars, or to China’s history

⁵² Saich 2006:41.

⁵³ Fewsmith 2004.

⁵⁴ McGee 1980.

⁵⁵ He in Lee (ed.) 2003:196.

⁵⁶ He in Lee (ed.) 2003:211.

as one of the world's most powerful nations and its intentions to return to its rightful position as a super power and a full and equal member of the international community.⁵⁷ The balancing between official and popular nationalism has become a challenge to the Party in the governing of media, and it strives not only to uphold a patriotic sentiment, but also to keep it from growing out of hand, putting China's international reputation at risk.⁵⁸

Feeding the nationalist sentiment among people has indeed also proved necessary in order to uphold the legitimacy of the CPC at home. When President Jiang Zemin released the twenty-four crewmembers of the U.S. spy plane that collided with a Chinese fighter in 2001, many self-proclaimed nationalists accused him of being too soft⁵⁹. Suisheng Zhao has noted one Western reporter's observation that "for the first time since the Communist Party took over in 1949, the rulers in Beijing were accused not of corruption or totalitarianism, but of treason."⁶⁰

Reporting on urgent health crises

The Chinese party-state's traditional approach to "risk communication" grows out of Marxist media theory, where political stability is prioritized and information is censored and controlled.⁶¹ It is also rooted in the older Chinese Confucian tradition of the paternalist state.⁶² Sæther showed how this media strategy was conceived by a journalist student she had a discussion with. The student said an earthquake happened in another part of the country during the spring festival in her childhood, but the media did not report on it until the celebrations were over because "otherwise people's vacations would be destroyed and it could have a negative effect on social stability."

Around big national events, the control of media is tightened and special instructions are sent to media. Both cases I will discuss below happened in such sensitive periods. In March 2003, the National People's Congress, where president Jiang Zemin would pass on the presidency to his successor Hu Jintao, was carried out. A peaceful succession of power was of utmost importance and would, as journalist and author Phillip P. Pan notes, provide "fresh evidence that the Communists had found a way to address the shortcomings of their autocratic political system without adopting

⁵⁷ Lampton 2001.

⁵⁸ Rosen in Lee 2003.

⁵⁹ Zhao 2004:26

⁶⁰ Zhao 2004:26

⁶¹ Tong 2011:50.

⁶² Sæther 2008: "Medias politiske rolle i Kina" (Radio lecture at P2-akademiet, Norwegian Broadcasting (NRK)).

democratic reforms or giving up power.”⁶³ In autumn 2008, China was going to carry out one of its greatest national prestige projects – the Beijing Olympics.

Patricia M. Thornton argues in her article “SARS and the Resilience of the Chinese Body Politic” that “crisis itself may have emerged as a mode of governance in its own right during the post-revolutionary era.”⁶⁴ She notes how the rhetoric of crisis may indeed “improve the speed and scope of policy implementation and reduce the ‘central-field’ gap in the short term” and that

it bears notice that crises are themselves discursively constructed by leaders, who frame them in a manner conducive to their particularistic interests and needs and in accordance with their perceptions.⁶⁵

In other words, to define a situation as a “national crisis,” like we will see was done quite clearly in both the following examples, may help implement policies that are unpopular on a local level by creating an atmosphere of national interest.

The Renmin Ribao

The Renmin Ribao (人民日报) is the official daily paper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. It has a worldwide circulation of 3 to 4 million, including versions in several non-Chinese languages. The English name is People’s Daily, and the online version, which was established in 1997, is called Renmin Wang (人民网.)

Since its establishment in 1948, the Renmin Ribao has been a window in which official policies have been announced, but also, especially after the reform and opening up started, where the direction of future policies and of important persons’ careers can be observed. McGregor says in his book *The Party* that the Renmin Ribao “acts as a kind of internal bulletin board for officials....”⁶⁶

During the Cultural Revolution, the Renmin Ribao was one of few sources of information. Today, commentaries and opinions still have to be approved by the Party, but one can nonetheless find viewpoints and debates that are not yet official policy.

The withdrawal of subsidies has happened slower with the Renmin Ribao than most Chinese papers, and it is facing both economical and credibility challenges. Wudun

⁶³ Pan 2008:199f.

⁶⁴ Thornton 2009:25.

⁶⁵ Thornton 2009:47.

⁶⁶ McGregor 2010:8.

and Cristof say that "In a fully commercial market, the People's Daily, China's flagship newspaper, would likely vanish without trace, so great are its credibility problems."⁶⁷

Eric Kit-wai Ma notes that the base readers of official papers to a large extent are offices where it is considered politically correct to read such papers, whereas people would read mass appeal papers at home.⁶⁸

The Nanfang Zhoumo

Many have described the Guangzhou-based weekly Nanfang Zhoumo as one of China's most liberal and outspoken newspapers. Pan says about The Southern Newspaper Group, the news group the weekly belongs to, that it is "An oasis of open-minded thinking" and that it's most daring paper, The Nanfang Zhoumo, is "winning readers and inspiring journalists across the country by showing how aggressive reporting and elegant writing could be possible despite censorship."⁶⁹

Sæther notes how the Nanfang Zhoumo has been particularly important in the process of the expansion of the critical journalism she has found within some media in China.⁷⁰ Journalists and editors in the Nanfang Zhoumo have, according to her, defined their political role in opposition to the top-down direction of the mouthpiece discourse, resulting in a paper reflecting people's grievances, exposing corruption, abuse of power and other social problems.⁷¹

The Pearl River delta has a special position in Chinese media history. One reason is that 18 million people living in this area have access to programming spilling over from Hong Kong broadcasters, including local productions and foreign programs⁷². A second reason is that the area has been an experimenting ground for economic liberalisation from the early 1990s. The owner of Nanfang Zhoumo is Guangdong Province, to which it provides significant revenues. Continuing official ownership paired with commercialisation has led to a new incentive structure, and Guangdong Province has sought to protect the popular paper from conservative authorities in Beijing.⁷³ That being said, throughout its history several editors have been removed from their positions or even detained.⁷⁴

⁶⁷ Cullen and Hua in Randall (ed.) 1998:162.

⁶⁸ Ma in Curran and Park (eds.) 2000:30.

⁶⁹ Pan 2008:239.

⁷⁰ Sæther 2008.

⁷¹ Sæther 2008:258.

⁷² Ma in Curran and Park (eds.) 2000:25.

⁷³ McCormick and Liu in Lee 2003:153.

⁷⁴ One example is the 2004 detention of top editors, following the paper's reporting on SARS and on a migrant worker who was killed in police custody (Stern, Rachel E. and O'Brien, Kevin J. 2011)

Analysis

Having painted a back drop of the historical and present situation of media and the role of the journalist in China as well as some of the current political ideologies, I will now go through the main findings from my material and discuss them underway with references to my background topics and to other relevant writings.

The Renmin Ribao on the SARS outbreak

The first report on the SARS outbreak in the Renmin Ribao was on February 12th. It was headlined "Some areas in Guangdong province have had cases of 'atypical pneumonia'⁷⁵ (*feidianxing feiyan* 非典型肺炎) – experts say that as long as the right kind of prevention is exercised there is no need to be afraid."⁷⁶ The information was taken from state news wire Xinhua's news service, where it had been published on February 11th, and the small article was placed in the left corner on the second page. Over the next two months, the paper had only seven minor articles on the case.

The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC⁷⁷) was the main office to speak about the disease at this point. In two articles, it stressed that 80 percent of the sickened had already been sent home from the hospital. In scientific circles, the search for the source of the outbreak had already started, and the director of the CDC, Li Liming, said it was guaranteed that the illness was a virus and that it was curable⁷⁸. On February 19th, the CDC said it had found indications that what it was dealing with was a form of Chlamydia bacteria that spreads through close contact with persons or birds⁷⁹. They concluded that a comprehensive and completed treatment was needed and underlined the necessity of preventive measures. On April 3rd, at a Ministry of Health (MOH) press conference, the minister added that some foreign specialists believed the disease was a virus⁸⁰.

⁷⁵ Later known as SARS (Severe acute respiratory syndrome). I will use the word SARS about the disease throughout the paper. The newspapers I read used the Chinese term also after the name SARS was introduced.

⁷⁶ Xinhua in Renmin Ribao: "Atypical pneumonia – experts say that as long as the right kind of prevention is exercised there is no need to be afraid" "广东省部分地区出现非典型肺炎 专家指出只要预防得当不必恐慌" February 12, 2003.

⁷⁷ This is an institution of the PRC, not to be confused with the American CDC.

⁷⁸ Xinhua in Renmin Ribao: "The SARS in Guangdong is already brought under effective control, most sickened has recovered and left hospital" "广东非典型肺炎已得到有效控制 大部分病人痊愈出院", February 15, 2003.

⁷⁹ Xinhua in Renmin Ribao: "The cause of SARS is basically determined, the use of targeted antibiotics is very effective" "广东非典型肺炎病因基本确定 采用针对性强的抗生素治疗非常有效", February 19, 2003.

⁸⁰ Xinhua in Renmin Ribao: "The Minister of Health, Zhang Wenkang, is answering journalists' questions about SARS" "卫生部部长张文康关于防治非典型肺炎答记者问", April 3, 2003.

Business as usual, but need to upgrade the system

When it started its intense reporting in early April, the Renmin Ribao painted a picture of a situation under control and of “business as usual” for tourists and companies. In a story based on the April 3rd press conference at the MOH, the Minister of Health, Zhang Wenkang, assured that it was safe to travel in China, he even encouraged people to come, and informed that the WHO had declared Beijing not to be an epidemic area anymore.⁸¹ The next day the deputy director of the Tourist Bureau, Sun Gang, assured through a press release that “China is still the most fertile land to invest in and the safest place to travel.”⁸² Two weeks later, on April 18th, the Tourist Bureau and the MOH sent out a detailed plan to the whole sector on how to take the necessary precautions.

It is likely that the government at this point was still struggling to get a grasp of the situation and that the approach taken at this first press conference was to control information in order to calm people down and avoid panic. To protect the economy and the climate for foreign investments might also have been crucial, considering the strong focus on economic growth and the close ties between the government and business owners. At the same time, it became obvious that the government was working intensively to solve the problems around the outbreak, and it quickly became clear that the system in place had severe flaws. In this first phase, the most critical voice in the discourse was Wu Yi, vice-premier of the State Council. Visiting the CDC for an informal discussion about strengthening the system to handle sudden public health cases, she underscored the need to build and improve the system of responding to and handling sudden public health cases, “especially the information system within public health and the system of warning and reporting.”⁸³

Timely and according to law

In many articles concerning the developments since February (when SARS was first reported,) it was stressed that the local government “timely” (*jishi* 及时) reported the disease. The “timeliness” was put in the context of the law, and as SARS was not classified as a disease under the “Law of prevention and cure of infectious diseases” until

⁸¹ Bai Jianfeng 白剑峰: “Zhang Wenkang declared at a State Council press-conference that it is safe to live and travel in China” “张文康在国务院新闻发布会上宣布, 在中国生活旅游是安全的”, Renmin Ribao, April 4, 2003.

⁸² Gong Wen 龚雯: “The responsible person at the National travel bureau expressed, when externally informing about the travel situation, that it is assured that it is completely safe and healthy to travel to any place in China” “国家旅游局负责人对外通报旅游情况表示 中国各地的旅游安全和健康完全有保证”, Renmin Ribao, April 4, 2003.

⁸³ Xinhua in Renmin Ribao: “On an investigation and research visit at the CDC, Wu Yi emphasis that it is needed to build and improve the response and handling system for suddenly emerging public health cases” “吴仪在中国疾病预防控制中心调研时强调 要抓紧建立和完善突发公共卫生事件应急处理机制”, April 5, 2003. (Original text: 要抓紧建立和完善突发公共卫生事件应急反应处理机制, 特别是公共卫生信息系统和预警报告机制)

mid February, the government had acted in time. "After that, my nation timely announced the national situation, and from April 1st it reported daily to the WHO about the epidemic situation,"⁸⁴ a journalist said when evaluating the government's handling of the situation.

The consequences of SARS being sorted under criminal law were discussed and explained by one of the paper's journalist in a conversation with a legal expert on April 23rd. Here, the responsibility of both the government and of regular people were outlined, but even though the law, which was quoted in the article, to a large extent focused on the government's rights and responsibilities, the main focus in the journalists and the law experts' comments were on the citizens responsibilities.⁸⁵

WHO as a source

From April 1st, China started to report daily to the WHO. On April 3rd, the first delegation of WHO experts arrived at Guangzhou to learn about the situation, and the Renmin Ribao followed the events leaning mainly on official accounts. The Health Minister had been confident, however, when he answered a German journalist at the April 3rd press conference, that as soon as the WHO got to know the situation in Guangdong, it would reconsider its stand that people should not travel to Hong Kong and South China.

Although the WHO made up a not insignificant 7,8 per cent of the sources in the discourse, its positive comments about the good cooperation with the Chinese side and their contributions to the work of finding good ways to cure the disease were repeated several times, and I will argue that they had a limited access to the discourse, considering their central role in coordinating the work of stopping the epidemic. The fact that WHO experts had been invited three times to come to China to cooperate with their experts served as a proof that China had been open about the case and that it had been sensitive to the WHO and the international community's need for information. At the same time, the government repeatedly said that it would work to increase the cooperation with the WHO.

Patriotic sentiments – The Taiwan issue and foreign media

In this first period of reporting, I found some situations where patriotic sentiments became part of the discourse. The first example is in a verbal dispute with Taiwan, the other one is a critique of foreign media's writings about SARS.

⁸⁴ Bai Jianfeng 白剑峰: "People's health is of utmost importance – an evaluation of my country's work to prevent and cure SARS" "人民健康重于泰山—我国非典型肺炎防治述评", Renmin Ribao, April 18, 2003. (original: "之后, 我国适时公布了全国非典型肺炎疫情, 并于4月1日起, 每天向世界卫生组织报告最新疫情)

⁸⁵ Wu Jia 武侠: "How to prevent and cure SARS according to law?" "防治非典如何依法办事?", Renmin Ribao, April 23, 2003.

On basis of the April 3rd press conference mentioned above, the Renmin Ribao made a story headlined “The central government focus on SARS in Taiwan.” Zhang Wenkang started out saying that “our fellow countrymen on Taiwan are our blood brothers, and blood is thicker than water.”⁸⁶ He then went on to refute allegations raised by the Taiwanese government that Taiwan had been ignored by China, and said “it does not exist any so-called problems that hinder Taiwan from obtaining information on the prevention and treatment of SARS.”⁸⁷ Zhang Wenkang warned Taiwan, saying that:

We hope the Taiwanese government officials do not again complicate matters or spread words with ulterior motives that do not have a grounding and that are irresponsible, even raise the sign of so-called ‘human rights’, seeking to use the epidemic situation in their ballyhoo to try to squeeze into the WHO, where only sovereign states can be members.⁸⁸

In the weeks to come it was silent about Taiwan until April 24th when the WHO’s representative in China was quoted saying that “when it comes to the problem of Taiwan, the WHO’s position is completely clear: Taiwan is a province of China.”⁸⁹ He went on to say that Taiwan had fully adequate channels through which to obtain the information of the WHO. The representative had participated in a seminar about SARS for “both sides of the Taiwan strait”, and the journalist underlined that according to the rules of the UN, only sovereign states can become members of the WHO or participate in “other activities.”⁹⁰

The Renmin Ribao regularly paid attention to how the foreign press covered the events in China. On April 17th, the paper printed a commentary written by Ren Guoping headlined “Speculations with evil intentions do not help the situation.”⁹¹ Here, the author quoted an article in The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) called “Isolating China,” and he accused the paper and others, among them “some Guangdong papers,” of having “lacked the good intentions and specialist attitude needed, and politicised the problem in order

⁸⁶ Bai Jianfeng 白剑峰: “The central government focus on SARS in Taiwan” “中央政府关注台湾非典型肺炎” Renmin Ribao, April 4, 2003. (Original text: “台湾同胞是骨肉兄弟, 血浓于水”)

⁸⁷ Ibid. (Original text: “不存在所谓台湾无法获得非典型肺炎预防治疗信息的问题”)

⁸⁸ Ibid. (Original text: “我们希望台湾当局领导人不要再节外生枝, 别有用心地散布一些没有根据、不负责任的说法, 甚至打着所谓人权的幌子, 图谋以非典型肺炎疫情为由, 为台挤入只有主权国家才能参加的世界卫生组织造势”)

⁸⁹ Liao Lei 廖雷, Zhang Yong 张勇: “A representative from the WHO says the WHO’s stand on the Taiwan problem is completely clear” “世卫组织代表说, 世卫组织在台湾问题上的立场一直是明确的”, Renmin Ribao, April 24, 2003. (Original text: “在台湾问题上, 世界卫生组织的立场一直很明确: 台湾是中国的一个省”)

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ren Guoping 任国平: “Speculations with evil intentions do not help the situation” “恶意炒作 于事无补”, Renmin Ribao, April 17, 2003.

to display its own political correctness.”⁹² The WSJ was quoted: “With regards to this illness, that emerged in Southern China, there are still today many unknown aspects. At the same time, we do not know how to cure it.”⁹³ The Renmin Ribao commentator underlined that it was as wrong and “unscientific” to say that SARS had emerged in Guangdong as it would be to say that AIDS emerged in the USA just because the first known cases of the disease were found there. He further pointed to the contradiction in the WSJ’s argument in that they said many things were still not known and at the same time claimed to know that China was the source of the outbreak. The author then denied the accusation that China had not shared sufficient information with the WHO by reminding that WHO specialists had been invited to China three times and that they had praised the work done. The commentator went on saying

If one follows an attitude of problem solving, one of a scientific, specialist spirit and directs viewpoints and proposals towards China, then China warmly welcomes that. But if one embraces some other motives and politicises the problem, then people cannot take it. As for some media who say that SARS is China’s ‘biological weapon’, that is even more a way to demonise China, and not even worth refuting.⁹⁴

We see here how the paper used the rhetoric of having been “wronged” by foreign agents with ulterior motives of harming China. Even though foreign media were often accused of being speculative and sensational, signs of support for China in foreign papers were also quoted with a strong sense of authority. One example was a report about how mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg, and other political figures across the US and Canada had visited their cities’ Chinatowns to “eat delicious food,” talk to Chinese people and show support for them. On April 18th, the Renmin Ribao referred to a Chinese language New York paper’s interview with Bloomberg where he had stated that “The saying that SARS has spread in Chinatown is simply a rumour. There are some people that on purpose want to harm Chinatown.”⁹⁵

In addition to these quotations from foreign media, the Renmin Ribao often printed minutes from press conferences at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where foreign journalists sometimes would ask critical questions. In all these sources made up 5,4 per

⁹² Ibid. (Original text: (“缺乏应有的善意与专业态度，将问题泛政治化，以显示自己的“政治正确”))

⁹³ Ibid. (Original text: (“关于这种始发于中国南部的疾病，目前还有许多神秘之处，而且没有治愈的办法”))

⁹⁴ Ibid. (Original text: (“如果本着解决问题的态度，以科学的、专业的精神向中国提出意见和建议，中国是非常欢迎的。但如果抱着什么其他目的，将问题泛政治化，就让人难以接受。至于有的媒体说非典型肺炎是“中国的细菌武器”，那更是“妖魔化”中国的手段，不值一驳”))

⁹⁵ Xinhua in Renmin Ribao: “Mayors of three American cities went their “Chinatown’s” to dine” “美三城市市长到“唐人街”用餐”, April 18, 2003. (Original text: (“有关“非典”在华埠蔓延的说法纯属谣言，是有人恶意指伤华埠”))

cent of the paper's SARS coverage, but because the questions were usually being refuted resolutely or turned around and used to promote patriotic sentiments, they had a limited influence in their own right on the discourse.

How to cure SARS – public health education

I will now look at how the Renmin Ribao reported about the nature of the disease, how to protect oneself from it and how to cure it.

In Guangdong, local health authorities, the local appointed expert group and the local CDC expressed several times that they had found an "effective" way to prevent and cure the illness. On April 7th, the paper printed information from the MOH under the headline "How to treat atypical pneumonia – the Ministry of Health announces recommended method."⁹⁶

I found that the Renmin Ribao journalists seldom used their personal observations when reporting. But in a rare story printed on April 14th, one journalist made an attempt that went beyond official reports to find out what exactly the SARS-treatment consisted of. He visited a doctor after having talked to a newly recovered patient on his way home from the hospital. The doctor called the method he had used curing the patient a "comprehensive" (*zonghexing* 综合性) one, where he had

made use of virus resistant, anti-Chlamydia drugs, medicaments to strengthen the immune system, antibiotics to protect against secondary infections and a non-invasive breathing machine to help him through more than 10 days of respiratory distress.⁹⁷

On April 18th, the followers of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) got a warning from two experts who said that abuse of TCM could cause more harm than good. They then gave advice of a type of medicine that could benefit a broad group of people, and at the end of the article the readers could learn in detail how to prepare the medicine.⁹⁸

In an article printed on April 19th, the readers got a group of experts' advice, labelled "the Four diligent and the three good" (*si qin san hao* 四勤三好.) They urged

⁹⁶ Bai Jian Feng 白剑峰: "How to treat atypical pneumonia – the Ministry of Health announces recommended method" "非典型肺炎如何治疗 卫生部公布推荐方案", Renmin Ribao, April 7, 2003.

⁹⁷ Zong Huanping 宗焕平, Wang Sihai 王思海: "More than 200 sickened has recovered and left hospital in Beijing and Hong Kong" "京港二百多位"非典"患者康复出院", Renmin Ribao, April 14, 2003. (Original: "运用了抗病毒、抗衣原体和提高免疫力的药物, 并用抗生素防止继发感染, 用无创呼吸机帮他度过了呼吸窘迫的10多天时间")

⁹⁸ Yu Shujun 王淑军: "Specialists brief about the preventing and curing of SARS – don't misuse Chinese medicine, boil in a proper way" "专家提示预防非典—中药勿滥服 煎服应得法", Renmin Ribao, April 18, 2003.

people to make use of simple methods to avoid getting infected or spreading the disease; among other things they explained in detail how one should wash one's hands⁹⁹.

On the organizational level, one could on April 22nd read an article about how a "model" neighbourhood in Guangzhou, with a concentrated population and several SARS cases, had overcome fear by providing tight follow up by doctors and by distribution of information in form of leaflets as well as community meetings¹⁰⁰.

Finally, on April 23rd, a lengthy article written by the director of Beijing University of Public Health, Hu Yonghua, put SARS into the wider historical context of infectious diseases. He reminded about the breakthroughs of scientists the last 100 years in making vaccinations and eliminating many of those diseases. With an optimistic flavour, underlining his faith in the ever more rapid scientific progress, he carefully explained how to fight a disease by using SARS as an example.¹⁰¹

The format of the Renmin Ribao seemed suitable for broad "public education," and I regularly found articles with a question as a headline, such as "Why do some SARS patients die at once, while most people completely recover?"¹⁰² In these articles, specialists gave answers without interruption from a journalist or efforts to make it tabloid.

Leaning on science, but no room for "individual acts"

Finding the source of SARS was early declared to be of great importance, and on April 14th, the Renmin Ribao quoted a MOH report that demanded a "strengthening of the coordination of research on the source of atypical pneumonia."¹⁰³ To facilitate this, the ministry had established a coordination group which scientists should report their findings to daily. It was underlined, however, that only authorised researchers were allowed to report and that all information that did not come from the MOH were to be considered "individual acts" (*geren xingwei* 个人行为.)¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Xu Jinzhang 胥金章, Huang Xianbin 黄献斌: "To guard against SARS one should follow the "four diligent" "防范非典要做到"四勤三好", Renmin Ribao, April 19, 2003.

¹⁰⁰ Liu Taishan 刘泰山, Mao Haowen 冒浩文: "How to effectively prevent SARS in the community?" "社区怎样有效防非典?", Renmin Ribao, April 22, 2003.

¹⁰¹ Hu Yonghua 胡永华: "Humanity have the power to conquer all kinds of infectious diseases" "人类有能力征服各种传染病", Renmin Ribao, April 23, 2003.

¹⁰² Zhu Yu 朱玉, Zhang Jingyong 张景勇: "Why do some SARS patients die at once, while most completely recover?" "为何有的非典患者很快死亡而大多数人能痊愈?", Renmin Ribao, April 20, 2003.

¹⁰³ Ministry of Health in Renmin Ribao: "The Ministry of Health request a strengthening of the organising of the research work to find the cause of SARS, scientists from around the world is intensifying its research on the cause of SARS" "卫生部要求加强非典型肺炎病原学研究的管理, 世界各国科学家正加紧研究非典型肺炎的病原", April 14, 2003.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

It was interesting to see how the words “science” (*kexue* 科学) and “scientific” (*kexuede* 科学的, *kexuehua* 科学化) were used extensively, both by journalists and political leaders, during this period. Science obviously played an important role in the handling of SARS, but when the word was used as an adjective or adverb, the meaning of it became less clear, and it started to move into the ideological-political realm of the ideograph. “Facing SARS, we should have a scientific, active attitude,”¹⁰⁵ a commentary printed on April 11th started out, before the author went on to calm down people by saying that it was normal to catch the flu in springtime and that it was therefore no need to worry if one caught a cold. In another article, on April 24th, a commentator said, after having emphasised how SARS after all affect very few people:

Seen in the light of the present situation, we must scientifically and rationally handle SARS by minding personal health care, improve immunity and do all in our power to eliminate this infectious disease as soon as possible.¹⁰⁶

The top leaders often said that the people and government alike should “rely on science” (*yikao kexue* 依靠科学) and that if they did there was no need to be afraid. A scientific attitude seemed to be something that everyone could have and to be the best way to meet the challenges and avoid chaos. It seemed to mean not merely the opposite of “superstition” (*mixin* 迷信,) but rather all kinds of rumours that did not have an official stamp. An example might be how the claim in some foreign papers that SARS had originated in Guangdong was blown off as “unscientific” (*bu kexuede* 不科学的.)

The health workers and the cadres – model workers and military references

Most of the news articles in the Renmin Ribao were written in a somewhat technical language with a bureaucratic tone. I found, however, that the discourse of the health workers often came close to traditional Communist propaganda.

The health workers relatively early became symbols of the struggle against SARS and they were portrayed as brave heroes or “angels dressed in white” (*baiyi tianshi* 白衣天使.) The focus was on their high work ethic, how they never rested and how they made excuses to their colleagues when falling ill, as many did. They were “selfless and fearless” (*wusi wuwei* 无私无畏) and also portrayed as very modest when confronted

¹⁰⁵ Wang Shujun 王淑军: “No need to be afraid of SARS as long as one properly prevents and treats” “非典型肺炎 做好防治不足惧”, Renmin Ribao, April 4th, 2003. (Original text: “面对非典型肺炎, 我们应该有一个科学的、积极的态度”)

¹⁰⁶ Luo Chunhua 罗春华: “SARS will be subdued some day” “降服非典会有时”, Renmin Ribao, April 24, 2003. (Original text: “在目前形势下, 我们需要科学地、理性地对待“非典”, 做好自身的卫生保健工作, 提高免疫力, 为尽早消灭这一传染病而尽力”)

with these adjectives. Doctors and nurses were eager to "sign up for battle" (*qing zhan* 请战,) fighting on the "battlefield" (*zhan chang* 战场) towards the "enemy" (*di ren* 敌人) of SARS, and the ultimate goal was "victory" (*zhan sheng* 战胜,) The Party committee secretary at the MOH's Sino-Japanese friendship hospital described his role as following:

To rescue the dying and support the wounded is a doctor's bound duty, it is just like a soldier going to war. As long as there is one single patient that is still not saved from danger, I cannot leave the front line.¹⁰⁷

Cadres were often portrayed as fighting alongside the health workers, and at the hospital mentioned above they were carrying out a party-activity when the journalist visited, where party members would do something practical to show their loyalty to "the Party and the people." Several nurses wore red badges with CPC logos on their uniforms. The director of the hospital said that many nurses had sent applications to become party members during the SARS struggle. The cadres were portrayed as "taking the lead and making good examples" (*shuaixian chuifan* 率先垂范) through their work.¹⁰⁸ The head of the hospital ended this article, saying "If you compare the battle of the white soldiers to a forceful and roused symphony, then each party member provides a strong voice."¹⁰⁹

The overlapping roles of the health workers and the cadres and the use of war metaphors about both groups connects them to the Party in a way that talking about their good deeds gives legitimacy and honour to the Party.

Price speculation – green light for critique

Much of the reporting in the Renmin Ribao in this first phase either had a positive and optimistic flavour, urging people to lean on science and stay calm, or it raised sharp critique that fed patriotic sentiments, as discussed above. A domestic group that the paper directed critique towards, however, was the people who speculated in prices of the products related to the epidemic situation. Covering these challenges, the journalists also criticised the system regulating it.

Gong Wen, a Renmin Ribao commentator on the field of economics, wrote in an article that in spite of measures taken by the government the last two years to cope with speculation, the problem was still serious, particularly in connection to SARS.

¹⁰⁷ Bai Jianfeng 白剑峰: "The Communist Party is at forefront – a front line report from the prevention and curing of SARS work at the Sino-Japanese Friendship Hospital" "共产党员冲在最前面——来自中日友好医院防治非典一线的报告", Renmin Ribao, April 21, 2003. (Original text: "救死扶伤是医生的天职, 就像战士上了战场。只要还有一名患者没有脱离危险, 我就不能离开前线")

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. (Original text: "如果把白衣战士抗击非典型肺炎战役比喻成一部雄浑激昂的交响乐, 那么, 每一名共产党员都是乐章里的强音!")

Consumers were worried and unsatisfied, she concluded. The commentator wrote that "these 'black hearted' managers who destroy the order of the market should be punished according to law and not at all in a soft hearted way."¹¹⁰

On April 23rd, the Renmin Ribao reported that the National Committee for Development and Reform would carry out an inspection on prices of products related to preventing and curing SARS¹¹¹. The same day, several departments and bureaus issued a notice urging people to read the instruction on Chinese medicine carefully and to avoid buying and consuming it if the product did not come with an instruction. It went on to tell in detail what a proper product instruction should contain. The notice read:

Lately, some elements operating outside the law have taken advantage of the label 'preventing and curing SARS' and produced and sold fake drugs, swindled for the sake of their own benefits and misled the consumers.¹¹²

It was interesting to see that the field where discussion was most open in the Renmin Ribao was that of violations against consumers. It seemed consumers as a group had been blessed with some degree of the same protection as the business leaders.

The turning point

A signal of change in the governments approach to SARS was seen on April 19th, when the Guangdong Province mayor said in a working meeting with the government about SARS: "In the struggle against the illness we still have not reached a certain victory."¹¹³ This wording had a slight, but important change of flavour, and underlined the seriousness of the situation.

In the Renmin Ribao's April 21st report from a press conference held the day before, it became obvious that something serious had happened within the Party. It was Gao Qiang, Vice Minister of Health, who led the conference. He started out delivering new numbers from Beijing on SARS patients hospitalised, suspected to have been infected and the numbers of dead so far. The numbers represented a big jump from the last report, and Gao Qiang went straight on to ask: "why is the difference in numbers so

¹¹⁰ Gong Wen 龚雯: "岂容借疫情发'黑心财'"How can we tolerate that the epidemic situation is used to make money in a sinister way", Renmin Ribao, April 18, 2003. (Original text: "对破坏市场秩序的'黑心'经营者,依法处治,决不手软")

¹¹¹ Zhu Jianhong 朱剑红: "The National Committee of Development and Reform starts a special investigation into prices of medicines and related products" "国家发展和改革委员会—开展非典药品和相关商品价格专项检查", Renmin Ribao, April 23, 2003.

¹¹² Zhang Xiaosong 张晓松: When buying and taking Chinese medicine, one should read the instruction in detail – do not readily place trust in "miracle drugs" for preventing SARS" "购买服用中药应细读说明书 莫轻信预防非典"特效药", Renmin Ribao, April 23, 2003. (Original text: 最近,一些不法分子打着防治非典的招牌,制售假冒伪劣药品,行骗谋利,坑害消费者)

¹¹³ Liu Taishan 刘泰山, Mao Haowen 冒浩文: "Handle with a cool head, make persistent efforts, fulfil assigned tasks, don't shoulder too heavy tasks, Guangdong is in full force carrying out the SARS prevention and curing work" "沉着应对 再接再厉 不辱使命 不负重托 广东全力以赴做好非典型肺炎防治工作", Renmin Ribao, April 19, 2003. (Original text: "我们与疫病的斗争尚未取得决定性胜利")

big compared to just some days ago?” He pointed out three answers. The first was that there had been a sudden outbreak of a new illness and that it was a process to diagnose the disease. Secondly, he explained that the system of hospitals in Beijing, with some hospitals belonging to the city or the county, some to the MOH and the Ministry of Education and some to the Military and the armed police,¹¹⁴ “lacks effective connections and do not have a unified leadership. They are mutually unable to communicate and resources can not be integrated.”¹¹⁵ The result was incorrect data, he concluded. As a third point, he admitted that the MOH had not been sufficiently prepared and that the system to prevent epidemics was weak. Further, they had failed to make a national unified system of collecting and reporting information after the outbreak, the demands had been unclear and the guidance not beneficial.¹¹⁶

In the following session, Gao Qiang answered journalists, most of them foreign, in a much more open manner than seen in the two preceding press conferences. He did not merely make repetitions of what measures the government had taken, he also pointed directly to the weak parts and took responsibility for some of them. In his last address he said:

I do not support the saying that China is the safest place on earth and that you for sure will not get SARS if you come here. But at the same time, I do not support saying that China is a very dangerous country and that people merely by coming here will get ill.¹¹⁷

A new generation of leaders enter the stage

Even though already reported by Xinhua, the sackings of the minister of health and the Beijing mayor was neither mentioned in the Renim Ribao’s notes from the press conference nor in other articles the following two days. On April 24th, in an article headlined “In the midst of crisis, union is strength – people of the whole country are resisting SARS in a concerted effort,”¹¹⁸ one could read that the central government had, in order to handle the problems in the prevention and curing work of SARS, “Resolutely adjusted the posts of the cadres with the most important responsibility in the Ministry

¹¹⁴ The first cases of SARS in Beijing were diagnosed at a military hospital, an institution under the supervisory control of the PLA, with its well-known institutional preference for secrecy, rather than the MOH (Thornton 2009:35).

¹¹⁵ Xinhua in Renmin Ribao: “The State Council press office is carrying out a press conference – deputy minister of the standing committee of the Ministry of Health, Gao Qiang etc. answers journalist’s about the situation of preventing and curing SARS” “国务院新闻办公室举行新闻发布会 卫生部常务副部长高强等就非典型肺炎防治情况答记者问”, April 21, 2003. (Original text: “这些医院彼此之间缺乏有效联系, 也没有一个统一的领导, 信息互不沟通, 资源不能整合”)

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. (Original text: “我不提倡讲“中国是世界上最安全的, 你们来保证不会得SARS”这个话。但是我也同样不赞成说中国是一个很危险的国家, 来到中国就可能得病”)

¹¹⁸ Xinhua in Renmin Ribao: “In the midst of crisis, union is strength – people of the whole country are resisting SARS in a concerted effort – an on spot report” “危难中, 我们众志成城—全国人民齐心协力抗击非典纪实”, April 24, 2003.

of Health and the Beijing municipality government.”¹¹⁹ Such a silence among commentators about the reshuffle in the top leadership did not attest to a strong focus on government accountability by the Renmin Ribao, at least not in this first phase of reporting.

In the above-mentioned article, which was written in typical propaganda style, the phrase “new central leadership group” was used for the first time in my material. The article called SARS a “test” (*kaoyan* 考验) of the new leaders. It went on to describe how Hu Jintao had emerged at the frontline in Guangdong at the critical moment to see the health workers and praise their work. It also reminded about Wen Jiabao’s visits to the CDC, Beijing You’an Hospital, Beijing Normal middle school and kindergartens in the capital. It then recalled how the new State Council already had carried out three special meetings on SARS, how it had resolutely put SARS under legal regulation, how it made everyday reports to the WHO and to the public and its decision to establish a national system to handle suddenly emerging public health cases.

In my material I found a picture of a new leadership deeply concerned about the situation and the people, with a strong sense of responsibility and a long list of changes that need to be made. It is worth considering the positive consequences the declaration of a crisis may have had for the new leadership in its ambition to carry out administrative reform and consolidating its power.

Nanfang Zhoumo reporting on SARS

Turning to look at how the Nanfang Zhoumo covered the events in the spring of 2003, it becomes clear that it is quite a different kind of publication. The story reached the front page on February 13th, one day after the first article in the Renmin Ribao, and the whole front page and the second page was spent on SARS.

A short glimpse of a Guangzhou on alert

The front-page article was headlined “Guangzhou is struggling against an unknown virus,”¹²⁰ and had as many as 14 different sources, from mobile phone firms to online stock market pages to pharmacy employees. In the story, the journalist had not only interviewed many persons and found much information from different sources, but he had also been to several places himself and observed the situation. For example, he described the smell of disinfectant in the neighbourhoods of the city, observed the long

¹¹⁹ Ibid. (Original text: “果断对卫生部和北京市政府主要负责同志的职务作出调整”)

¹²⁰ Chen Min 陈海, Jiang Hua 江华: “Guangzhou is struggling against an unknown virus” “广州抗击不明病毒”, Nanfang Zhoumo February 13, 2003.

lines in front of pharmacies (where the drugs believed to cure the flu were either sold out or the prices had soared) and noted that nurses and patients at the hospitals were wearing surgical masks.¹²¹ The story gave the reader a picture of the situation that the Renmin Ribao never came close to provide. On the first page inside the paper, a journalist had interviewed an expert from the CDC. Here, a strong focus was put on laws regulating sudden public health situations, such as division of responsibility, systems of reporting, isolation and closing of schools¹²². The expert did not give his name, and most of the sources in the stories this day were anonymous. I will return to the implications of this below.

Hearsay to be fought with information

At the bottom of the front page of this first publication covering SARS, one of the paper's journalist had written a commentary headlined "Fear stops with openness."¹²³ He pointed at how it was wrong to blame people for spreading rumours in society because "the contents of this so-called hearsay is a matter of staying alive, and the right to life was early on universally acknowledged as the most fundamental human right."¹²⁴

In the whole material of 220 articles from the Renmin Ribao, the concept of "human rights" was only used as a negatively loaded word in the dispute with Taiwan. "Human rights" was not a part of the discourse about SARS in the Renmin Ribao, and when the Nanfang Zhoumo talked about it, it referred to the non-controversial "right to life," although it is linked to the right to information in a somewhat subtle way.

The commentary argued that people in the whole region had calmed down during one evening after they had listened to the information about SARS given at the press conferences of the Guangzhou City government and the Guangdong Province Health department on February 11th. In the featuring news article on the front page, it was explained how rumours of a "deadly flu" had started to spread in Guangzhou through friends, family and the Internet on February 8th.

Like the Renmin Ribao, the Nanfang Zhoumo commented on rumours spreading in society about SARS. But the discourses in the two papers differed fundamentally. When the Renmin Ribao talked about rumours, it focused on the "speculation" of foreign media and governments or the "individual acts" of scientists, whereas the Nanfang

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Wu Zhanguang 吴展光: "Interview with an expert at Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention – how to handle a huge, suddenly emerging public health crisis?" "国家疾病预防控制中心专家访谈 重大突发公共卫生事件如何处理?", Nanfang Zhoumo, February 13, 2003.

¹²³ Li Yiyan 李一言: "Fear stops with openness" "恐慌止于公开", Nanfang Zhoumo, February 13, 2003.

¹²⁴ Ibid. (Original text: "因为这里所谓的谣言的内容攸关生命, 而生命权早已成为举世公认的最基本的, 最首要的人权")

Zhoumo mainly talked about regular people's search for basic information on how to protect themselves against the disease. This demonstrates the bottom-up perspective Nanfang Zhoumo is said to represent.

Negotiating the role of the media

In the "Fear stops with openness" commentary, the journalist moved on to discuss the role and mandate of the press to pass on important information to individuals. In light of the change in people's lives before and after the press conference, he argued that "people cannot but come to the conclusion that it is time to closely examine the role and function of the media.¹²⁵" He explained the spread of rumours as caused by the lack of "the authoritative voice of the media and the government." He then went on to remind of the history of media as an information channel between people and between the government and the people. But, he said "for a long time, some places, some officials have ignored the role that media has in substituting the people in obtaining necessary information and in spreading it." He argued that because these officials had been stopping certain information from being passed on according to certain "conventions" (*guanli* 惯例,) media were unable to carry out its role.

We see here how the Nanfang Zhoumo were using the opportunity to argue for media's role and agency by placing it in a domestic historical context. It did not directly refer to a "professionalism" ideal, but to something closer to a "Confucianist intellectual" ideal, as described in the background chapter. The key word was "openness," and the author actually went on to acknowledge the Guangdong Province government for having provided information about the disease "relatively timely" and thereby calmed down the public. "The reality proves that openness has not only not led to chaos (*tianxia da luan* 天下大乱,) it has also rapidly calmed down the so-called rumours." This formulation can be seen as a critique against Communist Party's traditional media strategy of holding back information to avoid public unrest.

Anonymous sources

In spite of their claim that more openness in information would fight hearsay, the Nanfang Zhoumo used a lot of anonymous sources in their first stories about SARS. People from the government, hospitals, pharmacies or other media were quoted without being named. This attested both to the journalists and to the public's awareness of the sensitivity of the situation, but at the same time it represented a credibility problem for

¹²⁵ Ibid.

the paper, as readers had no means to check the correctness of its writings. In such a situation, the paper had to rely on peoples' general trust towards it, but it also became vulnerable to accusations of spreading rumours itself.

The silence and the turning point

After its February 11th issue, the Nanfang Zhoumo did not cover SARS again, except from in a small article discussing its influence on the economy, until two and a half months later, in the April 24th issue. That day, the front page and the following five pages were filled with SARS-reports. In the featuring article on the front page headlined "What do we lean on to win over SARS?"¹²⁶ the journalist called April 20th, the day it was made public that Minister of Health, Zhang Wenkang, and the Beijing Mayor, Meng Xuenong, had been removed from their party posts, a "turning point" (*zhuanzhedian* 转折点.) At the press conference that day, the new Vice Minister of Health, Gao Qiang, had admitted that "there really are some defect and weak links in the work of the Ministry of Health."¹²⁷ The journalist remarked that many commentators later pointed out that it was the "first time in more than 10 years" that a high level leader admitted faults of the government's work at a press conference."¹²⁸

The reporter argued that Hu Jintao's trip to Guangdong, where he had expressed the seriousness of the situation, and the resent instructions to be cautious, especially when travelling to the Western regions, the countryside or epidemic regions, had brought the truth closer to people. Hu Jintao had indeed been right when he at an inspection of the Beijing Military Hospital the same day had declared that the key thing to do was to "fully make use of the important effects of science," the journalist noted. Still, it was disappointing that the scientists needed such a long time to find the culprit of the disease and that they had held on to the Chlamydia theory for days even after several foreign researchers pointed to the Corona virus¹²⁹. An unnamed researcher from Beijing pointed to several things that should be improved, first of all better cooperation among scientists. The process guided by the WHO that had eventually led to identifying of the virus was then explained in some detail before the journalist returned to the issue of law and took pains to explain the implications of SARS having entered the laws for regulating infectious diseases. He underlined that the task for the time to come was to

¹²⁶ Li Hujun 李虎军, Guo Guangdong 郭光东: "What do we lean on to win over SARS?" "我们靠什么战胜"非典"?", Nanfang Zhoumo, April 24, 2003.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

follow these laws and systems, that were actually established more than 10 years ago, as well as to build and improve the system of handling urgent health issues.

The challenge of the countryside and the voice of village people

In the same April 24th issue, the paper's journalists had visited several places in China, including Shanghai and Beijing, the North-eastern Ningxia Province, as well as a poor village in Shanxi Province, to report on the local situations there.

The article from Ningxia shed light on the challenge to avoid the spread of SARS to the countryside. It told the story of a passenger who got sick more than ten days after having taken a train trip from Beijing to Inner Mongolia and how the effort to make sure the disease did not spread further had been carried out, after much discussion and uncertainty about the consequences, by publishing the number of the carrier the patient had been on in local and national media.¹³⁰

The story from Shanxi had a focus on common people's knowledge about SARS. After having described that none of the people of all ages who stood around him wore surgical masks and that there had been no smell of vinegar (used to disinfect) in the village, the journalist noted that the village people actually did know the symptoms of the disease.¹³¹ One of the villagers pointed to the sky and stressed that the air was much cleaner than in the city. This was their "magic weapon" (*fabao* 法宝,) he said, referring to the by then common knowledge that circulation in air might help prevent the spread of SARS. Having learned about the conditions of health care in the village, however, the journalist concluded that it was their "only magic weapon." The nearest health station was a 40-minute bike ride away, and with an average annual salary of 300 yuan, the villagers did not have money to buy herbal medicine or surgical masks, a government official informed. After having explained the shortcomings in the medical facilities on the countryside, where there was not a single breathing machine and isolation clothes had not yet arrived, the head of the Health Office in the county concluded that the effort had better be focused on avoiding a scenario where SARS spread to his county.

As in the first issue, it was highlighted in many of the articles that even though the situation had proven to be worse than first reported, people were calmed down by more accurate information. In the example from Ningxia, an official from the local health department said:

¹³⁰ Lu Rong 卢嵘, Du Junxiao 杜峻晓: "Ningxia is trying to block "SARS"" "宁夏追堵"非典", Nanfang Zhoumo, April 24, 2003.

¹³¹ Wu Zhanguang 吴展光, Zheng Yigong (Shanxi Financial Daily) 郑亦工 (山西经济日报记者): "Xing county in Shanxi - a record from a poor county's SARS struggle" "山西兴县 一个贫困县的抗非典纪录", Nanfang Zhoumo, April 24, 2003.

The effects prove that reporting the case did not lead to unnecessary fear, but quite the opposite. Knowing the situation, people could understand the sense of responsibility of the government.¹³²

At the same time, the reports from the countryside showed a situation of great concern and drew up the “worst case scenario” it would be if SARS got out of hand and spread to poor areas. Common people made up 31,5 per cent of the sources in the Nanfang Zhoumo’s coverage of SARS, making them a significant part of the discourse.

The “atypical” case of Haicheng

During the long period of silence between mid-February and the beginning of April, the only mention of SARS came in the issue preceding the one where the epidemic once again reached the front pages.

In the paper’s commentary section, on April 17th, a reference was interestingly made to SARS in a different case under the headline “The ‘atypical case’ of Haicheng.”¹³³ At this point, the two Chinese characters that make up the word atypical (*feidian* 非典) had already become the abbreviation for SARS. In this commentary, the author told a story from the city of Haicheng, where 2500 school children had been hospitalized after drinking a soymilk product served at the school canteen.

The author explained how the city government had tried to stop families from travelling to other cities to go to hospitals by patrolling at the train station and how they had tried to hinder parents from talking to journalists by sending a notice that said, “If you can avoid, do so.”¹³⁴ As in the case of SARS, the local government had hesitated to report the case to higher government levels. Only after media in other cities learned of it from families seeking help at their hospitals, had the central government received knowledge about the situation.

At the end of his story, the author played with the word “atypical” to criticize the local government: “One can say that this is some localities’ typical method to handle similar atypical cases,” he said with reference to how the local government had made pains to avoid that media or higher government levels got to know about the scandal. Finally, the author concluded that if the aim of the government was to “reassure the

¹³² Lu Rong 卢嵘, Du Junxiao 杜峻晓: “Ningxia is trying to block ‘SARS’” “宁夏追堵”非典”, Nanfang Zhoumo, April 24, 2003. (Original text: “实际效果证明, 通告没有引起不必要的恐慌, 老百姓反而从中意识到了政府的责任感”)

¹³³ Liu Hongbo 刘洪波: “The ‘atypical’ case of Haicheng” “海城的”非典型事件”, Nanfang Zhoumo, April 24, 2003.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

public” (*anding renxin* 安定人心,) this method of “indifference” (*an zhi ruo su* 安之若素) was not suitable. “What kind of humanitarianism (*rendaozhuyi* 人道主义) is that?”¹³⁵

This article is an example of how the Nanfang Zhoumo used clever methods to avoid censorship by talking between the lines. Because of the obvious similarities between the Haicheng case and the SARS cover up and the use of the word “feidian”, the commentary actually did function as a critique against the system as well as against the government’s secrecy about SARS.

The tainted milk scandal in the Renmin Ribao

Five years after the last SARS patient had recovered in June 2003, the alarm lamps in Beijing once again started blinking – a little too late. This time, the central government was informed by the government of New Zealand that babies had fallen ill from drinking a baby milk formula produced by the Chinese owned company Sanlu. The New Zealand company Fonterra, that had a 43 per cent stake in Sanlu, had alerted its Chinese partner on August 2nd, but its request for an official recall had been refused. Fonterra then asked New Zealand to talk directly to Beijing, which it did three days later.

A clear connection

The Renmin Ribao published its first report about the Sanlu-case on September 12th, 2008. The story was headlined “Infants in Gansu have contracted kidney stones after drinking baby milk powder formula – the Ministry of Health highly suspect milk powder contamination - Sanlu Group is calling back a part of their milk formula product.”¹³⁶ The short article, in which the MOH assured that measures now were taken, was placed in the economy section on page 11. The local health authorities in Shijiazhuang city, where Sanlu's headquarter was located, said that each of the 59 babies that had fallen ill, there among one who had died from the injuries, had been fed with the same type of baby formula produced by Sanlu.¹³⁷

The next day it was reported that instances of kidney failure in infants had also been found in other provinces. Sources in the Shijiazhuang government said that the melamine had been added to the raw milk by “unlawful elements” (*bufa fenzi* 不法分子) and that they were still in the process of investigating whether Sanlu itself also were

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ceng Huafeng 曾华锋, Zuo Ya 左娅: “Infants in Gansu have contracted kidney stones after drinking baby milk powder formula – the Ministry of Health highly suspect milk powder contamination - Sanlu Group is calling back a part of their milk formula product” “甘肃婴儿喝奶粉患结石，卫生部高度怀疑奶粉污染，三鹿公司召回部分奶粉”，Renmin Ribao, September 12, 2008.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

guilty of adding the chemical¹³⁸. That day and the days that followed, the news about the Sanlu-case were moved to page 2 under domestic headlines, and on September 13th, the case was classified by the State Council as having activated "the highest level of alarm for serious national food security crisis."¹³⁹ An expert group led by Gao Qiang¹⁴⁰, the party secretary of the MOH, had been set up to investigate the case.

Consumer information

In this first phase, the paper had a focus on urging parents to report if their child showed symptoms of poisoning and that the financial government institutions would pay for the medical treatment.

On September 17th, the first results of the inspections were published in the form of lists – one list with the names of the 87 companies clean of tainted milk and one with the 22 companies where inspectors had found melamine in products. The amount of melamine in each product was also published. It was highlighted that no contaminated products had been found among milk provided to the Olympics and the Paralympics. Experts also underlined that melamine was an industrial chemical with a low degree of poison in it and that infants had to consume it in large quantities before they would get problems with the urine system. Most of the affected could be cured by drinking large amounts of water and urinate often, unnamed experts said.¹⁴¹

As it became clear that more and more people were affected by the scandal, the number of sickened infants became important and was reported daily.

"What have you done so far?" and "Who knew what when?"

The question of when the central government had been informed about the situation was raised on a press conference in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the 16th of September, and the Renmin Ribao printed this question as well as the spokesperson of the ministry, Jiang Yu's, answer on September 17th:

¹³⁸ Xinhua in Renmin Ribao: "It is preliminarily assumed that unlawful elements have added melamine to raw milk – Beijing, Hubei and Hunan etc. has also received reports of instances" "初步认定不法分子在原奶中添加三聚氰胺 北京湖北湖南等地也接到病例报告", September 13, 2008.

¹³⁹ Wang Junping 王君平: "Severely handling Sanlu baby formula case, the State council is activating the highest level of response for large national food safety accidents, establishing urgent small leadership group to deal with it and gives free rescue and curing for the sickened" "严肃处理三鹿婴幼儿奶粉事件 国务院启动国家重大食品安全事故I级响应 成立应急处置领导小组 对患病婴幼儿免费救治", Renmin Ribao, September 14, 2008.

¹⁴⁰ During SARS, Gao Qiang was also Party secretary of the Ministry of Health as well as deputy minister of its standing committee. As mentioned above, he stepped in to handle the SARS crisis after Zhang Wenkang was removed.

¹⁴¹ Zou Ya 左娅: "Publication of the results of a periodic special investigation for melamine in Sanlu's infant formula" "婴幼儿配方奶粉三聚氰胺专项检查阶段性检查结果公布", Renmin Ribao, September 17, 2008.

AQSIQ¹⁴² and the Ministry of Commerce received the report about the Sanlu baby milk formula problem from the New Zealand side. Before this, the relevant local government had already handled the situation concerned and implemented measures. After the central government received the reports from the local governments, the emergency system was immediately activated and the related arrangements were made.¹⁴³

Here, the spokeswoman actually avoided answering the question; she just said that the central government had acted right after it got the report from the local government.

By printing the question of “who knew what when,” the paper relatively early addressed the issue of responsibility, although the journalist did not challenge the spokeswoman’s hazy answer. Typically, a Renmin Ribao journalist would ask a government official questions that gave an opportunity to tell what the government had done and would do as well as to repeat the information it needed to give to the public. That being said, in my material from the milk scandal more critical questions from the journalists were raised than during SARS.

Representatives from the industry were given column space to put several problems on the agenda. On September 21st, a journalist had interviewed dairy companies and in one article he asked the director of the China Dairy Industry Association chairman, Liu Chengguo: “So, what do you think have to be done to promote a persistent healthy development of the dairy industry?”¹⁴⁴

Critique of the food safety system

Covering the milk scandal, the Renmin Ribao had 7,1 per cent opinion articles, compared to 5,2 per cent during SARS. In these commentaries a wider range of topics were discussed than during SARS and a wider range of opinions were expressed.

In the September 17th article “Who will recall unsafe products?”¹⁴⁵ Wang Bixue, a Renmin Ribao commentator with a law background, pointed out the shortcomings she had found in a new regulation draft on food safety. She pointed to several loopholes in the draft that left the responsibility to discover unsafe products to producers and business managers and for recalling them to the producers. She asked whether these regulations would be effective, relying solely on the amount of self-regulation of these

¹⁴² General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine of the People's Republic of China.

¹⁴³ Renmin Ribao: “The spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is answering journalist’s questions about the Sanlu case” “就三鹿奶粉有关问题 外交部发言人答记者问”, September 17, 2008. (Original text: “中国国家质检总局和商务部分别接到新西兰方面有关三鹿奶粉问题的通报。在此之前，中国有关地方政府已掌握了有关情况并采取措施。中国中央政府在接到地方政府通报后，立即启动应急机制并作了相关部署”。

¹⁴⁴ Feng Hua 冯华: “Safe milk needs to be protected systematically – interview with Liu Chengguo, director of China Dairy Industry Association” “放心奶需要机制保障—访中国奶业协会理事长刘成果”. (Original text: 那么您认为怎样才能促进奶业的持续健康发展?)

¹⁴⁵ Wang Bixue 王比学: “Who will recall unsafe products” “谁来召回不安全食品”, Renmin Ribao, September 17, 2008.

two. After all, a recall would be “a blow both to the producer and the product’s name,” she said. She further pointed out that it was no opening for use of coercion against those who neglected their responsibilities. Her conclusion was that it must be made clear in law that whoever discovered unsafe products had to report it to the regulating government organs, so that they could solve it according to law and order a recall.

The next day, a report from an executive meeting in the State Council led by Wen Jiabao on September 17th showed that the government also had critique to offer:

It is of the meeting’s opinion that the Sanlu baby milk formula case reflects a chaotic milk product market, where the supervision and control systems have loopholes and the supervision and control work is weak. A sincere lesson must be drawn from this. With an attitude of high level of responsibility towards the people, the handling of the incident must be done in a good manner, the inspection and monitoring system must be perfected and the supervising and control work must be strengthened.¹⁴⁶

After having lined out how to clean up the market, the meeting underlined the need to encourage producers of clean milk to continue their production in order to make sure it would be enough baby formula on the market. It also emphasised that the dairy farmers affected must get some support. Lastly, the need to discover the reason behind and to punish the guilty was underscored.¹⁴⁷

In the above-mentioned interview with Liu Chengguo, director of the China Dairy Industry Association, he came with specific advice to the industry and the government. His focus was on the roots of the unstable economy in the dairy industry, like the fact that farmers and the final producers had few mutual interests, the need for a third party supervising organ and for a fund to help farmers, whom he pointed out was the most vulnerable group in the long production chain.¹⁴⁸

Commentator Su Xianlong on September 23rd raised a question that would become the focus of much debate, namely that of the rationale behind the “National Inspection Exemption products” (*guojia mianjian* 国家免检) and the “Famous Chinese Brand products” (*zhongguo mingpai* 中国名牌), both quality stamps granted by the AQSIQ. After having argued that in an environment of fierce competition there was no

¹⁴⁶ Xinhua in Renmin Ribao: “Wen Jiabao leads an executive meeting at the State Council, decides to fully monitor dairy products, and reorganise the dairy industry” “温家宝主持召开国务院常务会议，决定全面检查奶制品，整顿奶制品行业”，September 18, 2008.

(Original text: “会议认为，三鹿牌婴幼儿奶粉事件的发生，反映出奶制品市场混乱，监管机制存在漏洞，监管工作不力，必须认真吸取教训，以对人民高度负责的态度，做好事故处理，完善检验监督体制，加强监管工作”)

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Feng Hua 冯华: “Safe milk needs to be protected systematically – interview with Liu Chengguo, director of China Dairy Industry Association” “放心奶需要机制保障—访中国奶业协会理事长刘成果”. Renmin Ribao, September 21, 2008.

room for "National Inspection Exemption products", he said that "In fact, the good and bad quality of products in the end can only be judged by the consumers. No product can rest on being chosen by an administrative organ or its agents."¹⁴⁹ He went on to say that the current situation, where indigenous brands are promoted without sufficient control, not only was a disadvantage for the industry and people, but also for government credibility.

The next day yet another commentator said that the "National Inspection Exemption products" system did not suit the current situation in China:

The problem is that under the condition of both a profit-seeking principle and lack of a construction for social trustworthiness, the corporation's self-discipline is usually uncertain.¹⁵⁰

Next, he listed up the problems connected to changing the system, and his conclusion was that the new "Food safety law" waiting for the NPC to approve it was a huge challenge, but also an opportunity to improve legislation.

Criminal trials and government accountability

On September 17th, in an article headlined "Hebei – the responsible people involved in the Sanlu baby milk formula case is being handled according to Party protocol," the paper told of a number of local leaders whom had been removed from their posts in government and in the Party. Without focusing much on it, they informed that Tian Wenhua had been taken off her post as party secretary at Sanlu and that she also, according to the paper's knowledge, had been taken off her post as chairwoman and general manager of the company.¹⁵¹ The criminal cases soon became the focus of the reporting, and the Hebei public security office reported about the developments. On September 18th, we learned that Tian Wenhua had been detained after the criminal procedure law,¹⁵² and on September 19th the Renmin Ribao reported that 18 people had been arrested suspected of involvement in the case¹⁵³. On September 23rd, the paper

¹⁴⁹ Su Xianlong 苏显龙: "After the cancellation of the selection of China Famous Brand" "名牌评选取消之后", Renmin Ribao, September 23, 2008. (Original text: "事实上, 商品质量的优劣, 最终只能由消费者说了算, 没有哪个产品的品牌是靠行政机构或其所属的中介组织人为评选出来的")

¹⁵⁰ Shi Guosheng 石国胜: "How to inspect when not "exempted from inspection"" "不"免检"如何检?", Renmin Ribao, September 24, 2008. (Original text: 问题是, 在市场趋利性原则和社会诚信体系尚未建立的情况下, 企业的自觉往往靠不住)

¹⁵¹ Luo Guojun 骆国骏: "Hebei – the responsible for the Sanlu case are dealt with in according to Party protocol" "河北 – "三鹿奶粉事故"有关责任人受到组织处理", Renmin Ribao, September 17, 2008.

¹⁵² Wang Fangjie 王方杰: "Sanlu Group's chairwoman and general manager, Tian Wenhua, is put under criminal detention" "三鹿集团原董事长总经理田文华被刑事拘留", Renmin Ribao, September 18, 2008.

¹⁵³ Peng Bo 彭波: "Another 12 criminal suspects in Hebei are caught" "河北又有十二名犯罪嫌疑人落网", Renmin Ribao, September 19, 2008.

reported that the responsible persons from Shijiazhuang party committee and government were now criminal suspects.

In a commentary printed on September 24th, headlined "Respect the popular will's (*minyì* 民意) request for accountability (*wenze* 问责,)"¹⁵⁴ the problem with lack of accountability of high officials was raised by the journalist Wu Yan. "Now, in the sweeping storm of demanding accountability, the public feel at ease,"¹⁵⁵ he said, with reference both to the milk scandal and to a mudslide in Shanxi earlier that month, where Zhang Wenkang, who had to step down as Minister of Health in the first period of SARS because of his bad performance, once again had to step down from his post - this time as mayor of Shanxi. His resignation during SARS was not mentioned in the Renmin Ribao.

The reporter argued that the recent investigations and prosecutions of officials at all levels mostly was a reminder that if one did not

carry out a transparent administration, open up to the public and work according to law, if there is no strong and effective external supervision, or if the public does not participate in forming social pressure and force, but if one merely let some officials tread on thin ice, let some industries become 'high risk industries,' then I am afraid a tragedy is hard to avoid.¹⁵⁶

Finally, the commentator concluded that if one took

one step further and turned the "request for accountability" into a system, using this as a fundamental strategy for preventing large scale safety cases, that would truly be to put people first and resolutely implement the concept of scientific development.¹⁵⁷

On October 1st, a Renmin Ribao journalist had interviewed the deputy secretary-general and government spokesman of Shijiazhuang. He asked: "As the local government, why did you delay the reporting of this case?"¹⁵⁸ The representative started out saying that he felt deeply guilty and that he profoundly apologized to the children and their families. He then explained how Sanlu had contacted Shijiazhuang government on August 2nd, urging them

¹⁵⁴ Wu Yan 吴焰: "Respect the popular will's request for accountability" "尊重民意的问责", Renmin Ribao, September 24, 2008.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. (Original text: "现在, 在席卷而来的问责风暴中, 公众感到了踏实")

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. (Original text: "如果做不到政务透明、公开, 做不到依法行政作为, 如果没有坚强有力的外部监督, 没有公众的参与以形成社会的压力与合力, 仅仅让几位官员"如履薄冰", 让几个行业成为"高风险行业", 悲剧恐怕还是难以避免).)

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. (Original text: 更进一步, 当问责成为制度之后, 对防止重大安全事故的治本之策, 是真正做到以人为本, 坚决贯彻科学发展观)

¹⁵⁸ Wang Minghao 王明浩: "The spokesperson of Shijiazhuang City government - on why the Sanlu baby formula case was delayed" "石家庄市政府新闻发言人—三鹿奶粉事件为何迟报", Renmin Ribao, October 1, 2008. (Original text: "作为当地政府, 为什么对事件迟报?")

first, to ask the relevant departments in the government to strictly investigate the quality of raw milk and to implement legal measures against the unlawful elements that added the melamine and other things that may harm the quality. Secondly, we asked the government to strengthen the management, control and coordination of the media, create a favourable climate for the industry in their recall of problematic products in order to avoid media hype and speculations about the case, that could create a string of negative impact on society.¹⁵⁹

Wang Jianguo said that it was a lack of "sensitivity" (*minganxing* 敏感性) of the city government and their inability to raise the problem to an overall level that made them wait until September 9th before they reported the situation to the Hebei province government. He admitted that their trust in Sanlu had been too high and that they should have questioned their credibility. In this article, the journalist was truly critical, something that also showed in his comments where he put weight on the facts about the scandal that were unfavourable to the Shijiazhuang government. Here, the very important structural problem of tight relations between local governments and businesses was quite directly touched upon.

The online public

In the above-discussed article, when talking about how the "storm of accountability" had left the public at ease, the author referred to Internet forums when he wrote

When respect was given to the popular will's request for accountability, (the government) got a positive response. By leaving comments on the Internet and other methods, the public expressed this approach as welcome and gratifying. A touching scenario of mutual understanding and support also emerged.¹⁶⁰

In this first reference in the Renmin Ribao to the netizens as a group, we see how they were discussed as "the public" and how the tone of the language was similar to that of the propaganda found during SARS. The postings on the Internet were used to express unity, harmony and support for the government's handling of the situation.

Wen visits "ordinary people" – the only hero in the story

On September 22nd, the Renmin Ribao reported from premier Wen Jiabao's inspection at a hospital, his visit to a market and to a residency area in Beijing.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. (Original text: "一是请政府有关职能部门严查原料奶质量, 对投放三聚氰胺等有害物质的犯罪分子采取法律措施; 二是请政府加强媒体的管控和协调, 给企业召回存在问题产品创造一个良好环境, 避免炒作此事给社会造成一系列的负面影响")

¹⁶⁰ Wu Yan 吴焰: "Respect the popular will's request for accountability" "尊重民意的问责", Renmin Ribao, September 24th. (Original text: "尊重民意的'问责', 得到了民意的正面回应: 公众通过网上留言等方式表达欢迎与欣慰; 在近期救治问题奶粉患儿工作中, 也出现了相互理解、支持与配合的一幕幕感人情景")

During SARS, Wen Jiabao was already an important source as member of the standing committee and the Prime Minister of PRC. In 2008, however, Wen Jiabao had taken a more "human" form, and in this report he was small talking with parents and children, who were waiting in line to be screened for kidney failure. "Where are you from?" "What kind of milk did you drink?" "Were any problems discovered?" he asked in an, according to the journalist, "deeply concerned" way.¹⁶¹ In the screening room, Wen walked over to a crying baby and "warmly comforted" her by saying "don't cry, it will be ok soon." The reporter even described the expression on the Prime Minister's face when the health personnel were telling him that they had already cured 20 children. "Hearing this, the distance between Wen Jiabao's eyebrows opened up a little,"¹⁶² he wrote.

On a visit to a retired man's house in a residency area in Beijing the same day, the old man could assure Wen that his grandson was healthy. The Prime minister took the opportunity to show his deep concern for the affected. He said: "Even if ordinary people have been understanding, as the government we feel very guilty." The man's daughter then said in a spontaneous manner: "We have faith in the government" and "This time the degree of transparency of the government has been high."¹⁶³

During SARS, the top leaders had a more serious and authoritarian inspecting role. Many have noted how Wen Jiabao has become a grandfatherly figure in the later years. During the earthquake in Sichuan in May the same year as the milk scandal broke, he won people's hearts by showing up in the disaster area, only days after the quake.

In a way, Wen Jiabao was the only hero in Renmin Ribao's story about the milk scandal. He was humble, honest and caring towards the people and resolute about what had to be done. His role was similar to that of the health workers in the SARS coverage. The style used covering Wen's visit to regular people was also when Renmin Ribao came closest to traditional propaganda-style in their reporting on the milk scandal, as he was described solely by positive adjectives.

¹⁶¹ Li Bin 李斌, Huang Jinqun 黄全权: "We shall be responsible to the people - Wen Jiabao visits children ill from the "Sanlu milk formula case" in Beijing and inspects dairy product markets" "我们要对人民负责—温家宝在北京看望“奶粉事件”患病儿童并考察奶制品市场”, Renmin Ribao September 22, 2008.

¹⁶² Ibid. (Original text: "听到这个消息, 温家宝的眉头稍微舒展开一点")

¹⁶³ Ibid.

The discourse of openness (公开)

During the inspection mentioned above, Wen responded to the lady's praise of the government's recent openness by saying: "We have to be responsible to the people, so we must accurately publish (*gongkai* 公开) the situation to common people."¹⁶⁴

The word "gongkai" was by 2008 well established as part of the top leaders' vocabulary. In dictionaries it refers to several adjectives, such as "open," "overt," "public," to the verbs "publish," "make public," "make known to the public" and as an adverb, to "openly". The characters "gong" and "kai" translate as "public" and to "open."

During SARS, we saw that the government turned around and started pursuing a more open line of informing about the case. It did not, however, in my material of 220 articles use the word "gongkai" about information to the public. In my 98 articles about the tainted milk scandal, the word was used 10 times, both by journalists and top leaders, usually connected to the word "transparency" (透明.)

Openness was also discussed using other terms. In a commentary published on September 22nd, written by Renmin Ribao's Jiang Hongbing, headlined "Scientific development is of utmost urgency," the author says that: "Having gone from the common practise of former times of reporting only pleasant news to daring to not cover up every large and small scandal is a significant improvement."¹⁶⁵

Seen in light of the history of Chinese government's media policy and the role of the journalist, this can easily be agreed upon. In her commentary the main aim was to urge for a "scientific development," but she obviously saw openness of government as a prerequisite for that. Still, an independent role of the journalist or the media was not taken into account in this kind of argument, and freedom of speech is not a topic.

In a report from Wen Jiabao's visit to the U.S. on September 24th, his "informal talk" with six Chinese language news company's chief editors in New York was passed on to the Renmin Ribao's readers. The editors acknowledged recent government openness in information, the timeliness and transparency and Wen Jiabao answered:

When it comes to openness in information, the important thing is openness in government administration. The work of the government must be transparent, it must be carried out in sunlight. Except from responsibility, service, contribution and honesty, a government should not have any other special powers. In the end we support two

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. (Original text: "我们要对人民负责, 就必须如实地把情况都向老百姓公开")

¹⁶⁵ Jiang Hongbing 姜泓冰: "Scientific development is of utmost urgency" "科学发展迫在眉睫", Renmin Ribao, September 22, 2008. (Original text: "从以往盛行的报喜不报忧, 到敢于绝不隐瞒任何大灾小祸, 已是不小的进步")

principles. The first is safety of the people; the second is openness in information. Openness in the administration must be systematic, and in practise continuously be improved.¹⁶⁶

In Wen's two principles rests the crucial tension between safety and openness. It seems, however that the word "safety", that often has been seen in connection to the other much used concepts "social stability" or "harmony", conditions that may be used as arguments against openness of information, through these scandals had come closer to be associated with the word "openness." I believe this had happened gradually, but that the experience with the SARS scandal might have been an important factor. The fact that both Wen Jiabao and the commentators in the Renmin Ribao discussed this concept to some extent might imply that it had become politically accepted to question government openness in a broader sense than before.

My impression, however, having read about SARS and especially the tainted milk scandal, is that "openness" was being closely linked to the concept of "scientific development," an ideograph constructed and filled with meaning by the Party itself. In defining it, the Renmin Ribao journalists did not differ from the Party. The concept was not being linked to discussions of freedom of expression or freedom of the press and not at all to the discourse of "human rights," as the Nanfang Zhoumo did during SARS. It was rather connected to the task of making a more efficient government with local officials more loyal to the central government, something that had been a main focus for the Hu-Wen administration since they took office in 2003.

The tainted milk scandal in the Nanfang Zhoumo

In the Nanfang Zhoumo, the first articles to directly mention the milk scandal appeared in the edition published on September 18th. Its September 11th edition did not mention the case, but the Xinhua story came out late that day, so it was probably not in time for the printing of the weekly.

Between the lines

In the September 18th edition, the paper did not exceed the Xinhua version in its news coverage, but rather printed a time line (from September 11th to September 17th) of the scandal, squeezed into the inner margin, with all information taken from Xinhua. At the

¹⁶⁶ Li Shijia 李诗佳, Wang Jiangan 王建刚: "Wen Jiabao had an informal talk with the leaders of local Chinese language media in America" "温家宝与美当地华文媒体负责人座谈", Renmin Ribao, September 26, 2008. (Original text: "信息公开重要的是政务公开。政府的工作必须透明, 在阳光下进行。一个政府除了责任、服务、奉献和廉洁外, 不应当有任何其他特权。我们始终坚持两条原则, 一是把人民群众生命安全放在第一位, 二是实行信息公开。政务公开要制度化, 并在实践中不断完善")

bottom of the same page, the paper printed a commentary headlined "How to monitor the safety of food products."¹⁶⁷ The commentary focused on the effectiveness and functionality of the American monitoring system for dairy products and other food products and the resulting high level of trust among American consumers towards these industries. It did not mention the tainted milk scandal or Sanlu, but was somehow linked to it by the time line next to it and of course the similarity in topic. It was obvious that the Nanfang Zhoumo saw its limitations in what it could write about the scandal without getting reprisals at this point. But again, we notice how it made an attempt to indirectly communicate its point of view and relevant information to its readers.

Disciplining journalists

In another commentary in the September 18th issue, one of the paper's commentators, Xiao Shu, criticised Chinese media under the headline "Countless public relations show the degeneration of media."¹⁶⁸ He refreshed memory by telling that Sanlu only three years ago had mysteriously disappeared from a list made by some media of dairy companies connected to the "Big head baby scandal," where babies had become malnourished after having being fed bad baby milk formula. "Seen in the light of this, what really happened should not be hard to imagine," Xiao Shu said, probably hinting that Sanlu had used its connections (*guanxi* 关系) to get off the list. He then went on to criticise the unhealthy conditions in Chinese media, saying that media actually had its share of responsibility in letting the Sanlu case happen, because it followed the "unspoken rules" (*qian guize* 潜规则) of connections and pay offs. "The media must strive to break loose from the constraints of 'unspoken rules' and dare to report the whole truth to the public,"¹⁶⁹ he concluded in an attempt to discipline media itself. This again attests to the Nanfang Zhoumo's strong focus not only on the important role of the media, but also its responsibility. Without criticising the censors, it encouraged media workers to be more daring and carry out their important responsibility.

Netizens as a source

For the first time in my material, a blog post got considerable column space in the September 25th issue. In the main article on the scandal that day, headlined "Li

¹⁶⁷ Yang Xiaohui 杨小卉: "How to monitor the safety of food products" "安全食品的监管之道", Nanfang Zhoumo, September 18, 2008.

¹⁶⁸ Xiao Xun 笑蜀: "Countless public relations show the degeneration of media" "无量公关凸显媒体病变", Nanfang Zhoumo, September 18, 2008.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. (Original text: "媒体必须从潜规则的制约下挣脱出来, 敢于向公众报道一切")

Zhangjiang resigns, one more step forward,”¹⁷⁰ the paper referred retrospectively to a blog post where lawyer Zhou Ze had asked the AQSIQ director to resign two days before he did. He had argued in his blog that after an episode where melamine was found in pet food exported to the U.S. in March 2007, the AQSIQ had urgently facilitated sample testing of this chemical in other products, such as infant formula and liquid products, but nothing had been found. In 2008, it was the MOH that found melamine in domestic products. The paper said that “according to our understanding,” the AQSIQ after this event put melamine on the list of what to test export products for. “The AQSIQ let go of a good opportunity here,” the head of the Agricultural University of China’s department for food studies commented, following up Zhou’s point.

I found few references to blog posts or comments posted on the web in my material, but I believe what I found may reflect the trend to some extent. In my SARS material in Nanfang Zhoumo's first issue, it was said that people were getting information from the Internet about the epidemic. Some web pages were also used as sources. As we see, during the tainted milk scandal, the Nanfang Zhoumo quoted a lawyer who through his blog had raised critique against the control system for food. He was only one critical voice, but his role as a lawyer lent him some authority.

In the Renmin Ribao, I found one reference to the netizens, but there the voice was that of “the public” used in a way not too different from how the Party would traditionally talk about “the people,” the group it claims to represent.

The storm of accountability (问责风暴)

In the above-mentioned story, the Nanfang Zhoumo looked closer at the role and responsibility of the resigned director of the AQSIQ. The story’s under-headline read, “He was the spokesman for food safety in China. The department he led was 1.3 billion people’s assurance for safe food. On September 22nd, he took the blame and resigned.” On his last press conference before that, he had assured that he would severely handle the people involved that had neglected their duty or acted against the law. At the same press conference, the paper continued, he was asked why the AQSIQ had not found melamine in milk products earlier. The director answered that this chemical was not on any Chinese or international list of chemicals to test for in baby milk formula. This was questioned in lawyer Zhou Ze's blog, as outlined above. Further, the paper reported that already by June, worried reports from a parent and a doctor had been posted to the

¹⁷⁰ Su Yongtong 苏永通, Ma Changbo 马昌博: “Li Zhangjiang resigns, one more step forward” “李长江辞职, 下一步……”, Nanfang Zhoumo, September 25, 2008.

AQSIQ's webpage (that had now disappeared), something that added to the sense that the AQSIQ should have known about the problems at an earlier time. Hence, the paper concluded that even though the local government did not report it, the AQSIQ had its part of the responsibility for the scandal.¹⁷¹

Like the Renmin Ribao, the Nanfang Zhoumo mentions the mudslide in Shanxi and that the city's mayor had stepped down. In contrast to the Renmin Ribao, however, the paper reminds its readers that the mayor, Zhang Wengkang, had also left a top leader post before – as the Minister of Health during SARS. By merely pointing to this fact, the Nanfang Zhoumo illuminated how the practice of “request for accountability” did not necessarily mean the end of the career of a top politician. At the same time, it highlighted that it was worth remembering the fact that a party secretary, the one of Shijiazhuang city, had been removed from his party post. “That a full-time party committee leader is being held accountable is still a rarity,¹⁷²” the commentator noted. At the end of the article, the paper informed that Li would keep his membership of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

In a small commentary on September 25th, a Nanfang Zhoumo reporter discussed what he called the recent “Storm of accountability” (*wenze fengbao* 问责风暴,) arguing that a well run government would not have this kind of storm, as it was only due to an accumulation of problems and that it mainly served to appeal to the “public morale.” (*minxin shiqi* 民心士气)¹⁷³ In the end, he said, it was a strategy that “mends the fold after the sheep is lost” (*wang yang bu lao* 亡羊补牢.)

Covering the milk scandal, the Nanfang Zhoumo, like the Renmin Ribao, discussed several aspects of responsibility and government accountability. But it also pointed to overlapping roles and relationships and brought historical events into light to specify its critique. This investigative attitude was quite different from the debate in the Renmin Ribao, which mainly focused on where to go next. We saw that the Renmin Ribao journalist wrote in the article “Respect the popular will's request for accountability,” that the public felt at ease now that the “storm of accountability” had swept over the country. The Nanfang Zhoumo commentator did not seem to have the same ease of mind,

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid. (original text: “党委正职领导被问责, 尚属罕见”)

¹⁷³ Nanfang Zhoumo: “A well run government should not have storms of accountability” “善治政府不该有问责风暴”, September 25, 2008.

arguing that it mainly appealed to public morale, and that the problem was a government run in an unhealthy way, rather than its individuals.

Questions of legality and lawyers as a source

When the Nanfang Zhoumo picked up the debate of the “China famous brand” and “National exempt from monitoring products” practices, it focused on the legal dimension.

On September 25th, the paper printed an article where three controversial aspects of the selection process (*pingxuan san da zhengyi* 评选三大争议) of these products were pointed out. The story was based on a letter that lawyer Zhou Ze had sent the AQSIQ in the beginning of September. The three questions he viewed as controversial were: Whether the practise was against the law. Whether the committee was against the law and whether the practise was reliable.¹⁷⁴ The vice director of AQSIQ's quality department refuted all those criticisms in an interview with the paper conducted on September 10th. After the practice had eventually been abolished, the vice director said to the paper that the AQSIQ was no longer allowed to directly participate in the election of the winner. He then commented upon media's role: “There are also problems with the “Famous Chinese Brand products,” and media should reveal the negative sides. This is undisputable, (media) should also help to solve the problem.”¹⁷⁵

On October 2nd, the 2008 U. S. election was featured on the front page, but there was a reference to the article “The tainted baby milk formula case calls for a compensation package”¹⁷⁶ in the margin. In spite of the headline that referred to a collectively negotiated compensation package to the victims, the focus of the article was on a voluntary lawyers' group who provided legal aid to victims pro bono. Li Fangping, one of the founders of this group, said concerns about poor people had been the motivation for the group to be formed. Although the government had promised to compensate the costs of medical treatment, one family had already filed a civil lawsuit against Sanlu, hoping to speed up the process of compensation. In the article, different aspects of such an approach were discussed, and towards the bottom of the story it was added that many lawyers and legal scholars believed that a collectively negotiated compensation package would be most suitable in this case.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Su Yongtong 苏永通, Xue Tian 薛田: “Three controversial aspects of the selection of “China famous brand” ““中国名牌”评选三大争议”, Nanfang Zhoumo, September 25, 2008.

¹⁷⁵ Su Yongtong 苏永通, Xue Tian 薛田: “How to deal with quality problems of Famous brand products” “名牌展品出现质量问题怎么办”, Nanfang Zhoumo, September 25, 2008.

¹⁷⁶ Ding Buzhi 丁补之, Zhao Lei 赵蕾, Wu Yao 吴瑶: “The tainted baby milk formula case calls for a compensation package” “毒奶粉事件呼唤一揽子赔偿方案”, Nanfang Zhoumo, September 2, 2008.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

The volunteer lawyers' group was not mentioned in the Renmin Ribao in my material, although it may have appeared later. Lawyers organising outside official control like this is a sensitive issue in China¹⁷⁸. By informing about such a development, the Nanfang Zhoumo provided useful information to the people despite running risks with the censors.

The industry and the “law of the jungle”

On October 9th, the milk scandal had for the first time gotten half of the front page. A photo of a farmer and a milk cow, with a dramatic looking heaven behind them and farmhouses on both sides, followed the featuring story. The headline was “The Chinese dairy industry: From eight golden years to a complete mess.”¹⁷⁹ In the issue, the reader got to know the story of the dairy industry in China through several articles. We learn that in the golden period in the first part of the twenty-first century, farmers earned 4-5000 yuan per cow a year, but by 2008 the annual income per cow had fallen to 1-2000 yuan, as a result of, among other things, fierce competition between the brands.

The articles in this issue explored the background for the chaotic situation in the dairy industry, especially among the milk salesmen (*nai fanzi* 奶贩子) or middlemen, whose market was described as having a “strong law of the jungle flavour.”¹⁸⁰ Sources with direct experience from the market explained how it had evolved and several interest organs from the industry talked about the problems. In an interview with the paper, the leader of the Guangdong food industry committee, Zhang Junxiu, directed strong critique against a system where he said that government departments had made the supervision organs of the industry into “moneymaking sons.” “The profit relationship between government and industry should be embodied in tax collecting,”¹⁸¹ he said, referring to how the industry had to pay these organs to be “exempt from monitoring brands” and that this had created a “chain of profit” (*liyi dai* 利益带.)

The Renmin Ribao reported early Wen Jiabao's conclusion that the milk scandal was a result of a chaotic dairy market. The Nanfang Zhoumo sent its journalists out in

¹⁷⁸ Reports said that several of the lawyers were pressured or threatened by local officials to give up their work, for example this in The Telegraph, September 28, 2008: “China milk scandal lawyers threatened”.

¹⁷⁹ He Feng 禾风, Jia Siyu 贾恩玉: “Chinese milk industry: From eight golden years to a complete mess” “中国奶业: 黄金八年, 一地鸡毛”, Nanfang Zhoumo, October 9, 2008.

¹⁸⁰ Xu Nan 徐楠: “Revisiting a chaotic scene: ‘milk blenders’, connections and stupid cows” “乱象回溯: “调奶人”, “关系奶”和“傻子牛””, Nanfang Zhoumo, October 9, 2008. (Original text: 带着浓厚的丛林法则意味)

¹⁸¹ Zhang Jun Xiu 张俊修, Meng Deng Ke 孟登科, Wang Xia 王霞: “The government should not make supervising units into “moneymaking sons” “政府部门不能把检测单位变成收钱的“儿子””, Nanfang Zhoumo, October 9, 2008. (Original text: 政府跟企业之间的利益应该是通过税收来体现的”)

the field to investigate the conditions on the ground and was therefore able to concretise the problems.

The case of South Korea

Having examined the discourses in official and liberal media in China about the two biggest public health crises in the country in the reform period, I will turn briefly to look at how a similar national crisis was handled by media in South Korea in 2005–2006.

South Korean media

Although South Korean media structure was based on Western models and theories, particularly the Anglo-American free press model,¹⁸² Park Myung-jin, Kim Chang-nam and Sohn Byung-woo show how the media industry in South Korea has developed under strong guidance of the state. From the 60s the media became an important tool for the government in its task of achieving rapid industrialisation and modernisation after the Korean War. Media therefore owed much of its growth and wealth to the protective policies and preferential treatment from government. The result was an established media with mainly conservative ideological leanings and a lack of diversity in public discourse. In recent years, however, the state's power over media has decreased with the increasing dependency of media companies on income from advertisements.¹⁸³

At the same time, the authors remark how the emergence of progressive media, such as the Hankyoreh daily, represented “evidence of democratisation taking place in Korean society and changes in the power structure.”¹⁸⁴ The Hankyoreh was established in 1988 by journalists who had lost their jobs in the large conservative papers due to their roles in promoting freedom of the press and democracy under the military dictatorship. Unlike most Korean papers, that are owned by a family or business conglomerate, the owners of the Hankyoreh are 62,000 shareholders from all walks of life in Korea.¹⁸⁵ In the example below we will see how a TV-program aired on an independent TV-channel sent shock waves through Korean politicians, scientists and even rocked national identity.

Professional ethics under pressure

Hwang Woo-suk and his research team at Seoul National University (SNU) brought national honour to Korea when they claimed to have successfully produced patient-

¹⁸² Park and Sohn in Curran and Park 2000:121.

¹⁸³ Ibid 2000:120f.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ The Hankyoreh website.

specific stem cells in the laboratory.¹⁸⁶ The groundbreaking research, acknowledged by two articles in *Science*, a renowned international science journal, could someday give insight into many hereditary conditions and even create replacement tissues genetically matched to patients. For these achievements, Hwang gained full support from the government and, as we will see below, from a broad part of the Korean press and public.

It was therefore a devastating blow to national pride when the investigative news program *PD Notebook*, aired by Seoul-based Munhwa Broadcasting Corp. (MBC), on October 22nd reported that donors had been paid for eggs used in research, that junior lab members were among the donors and that Hwang had lied about the sources of the egg cells in the *Science* paper. This was regarded as a violation against international research ethics. Two days later Hwang admitted having lied about the sources and resigned from a newly appointed director position at the Stem Cell Hub.

In the first program the MBC did not, however, reveal that they had evidence showing that the results of Hwang's research published in *Science* in 2005 was actually faked with the help of a manipulated photo. Misinformed by the journalists that Korean prosecutors had already begun an investigation, a former colleague of Hwang had admitted the fraud and showed the reporters how he had manipulated the photos. The reporters secretly filmed the interview. On December 2nd, the top producers announced on a press conference that the report questioning the authenticity of Hwang's work was yet to come. Realising he had been tricked by the journalists to tell his story, the whistleblower told another TV program that *PD Notebook* had coerced him into giving the info, thereby breaking professional journalistic ethics.

Public outrage and ad pull outs

Considered by many to be the world's leading scientist in the field of stem cell research, Hwang had become a national hero and the audience supported him strongly even after he had admitted his violations towards research ethics. Over 20 000 comments were posted on the MBC's bulletin boards and reporters received threats from Hwang-supporters.¹⁸⁷ Hundreds of women also volunteered to donate eggs for research. When 11 firms pulled advertising from the news magazine, the MBC decided not to air the segment covering questions about the *Science* paper.

Choon Key Chekar and Jenny Kitzinger have observed how Korean media in 2004 actively promoted a nationalist framing of Hwang's work, under headlines such as “A

¹⁸⁶ *Science* website, January 2006: “How Young Korean Researchers Helped Unearth a Scandal ...” (news section).

¹⁸⁷ *News Guangdong*, December 2, 2005: “Disgraced Stem Cell Pioneer Seen As a Hero”.

great Korean achievement,"¹⁸⁸ how they advocated more financial support and asked the people to "render its unsparing trust and support' to Hwang's enterprise."¹⁸⁹ The authors remark that "such was the degree of nationalistic investment in the stem cell research enterprise that any critical questioning seemed unpatriotic."

The quest to become number one in stem cell research was also seen as important for the Korean economy, as there were great expectations that Hwang's discoveries could be commercialised resulting in a "bio-medical boom." This is also part of the explanation for the pro-business conservative media's approach.

Conservative media's reactions

After the first investigative report by the MBC, conservative media showed strong support for Hwang and spent considerable column space criticising MBC for its aggressive reporting methods. When a journalist from the conservative Chosun Ilbo, a newspaper described as "pro-capital and right winged,"¹⁹⁰ got an interview with Hwang after he had escaped publicity in December 2005, he described the professor in a sympathetic tone:

The familiar voice sounded faint over the cell phone on Monday morning, with a ring of weariness from too much happening too fast. But Prof. Hwang Woo-suk has been through much in recent weeks: he has been hounded by investigative reporters, apologized for ethical lapses as he pushed ahead with ground-breaking research, and quit all his official posts.¹⁹¹

In many of its news stories, the wording portrayed the scientist as "clean" and the MBC's reporting methods as "dirty":

Korea's broadcasting watchdog could punish MBC's investigative program "PD Diary" over alleged strong-arm tactics in digging the dirt on cloning pioneer Hwang Woo-suk and his team.

Although the journalists' methods were questionable, the impression was that national pride and popular opinion should go before critical investigation. President Roh Moo-hyun showed his concern about the situation in a post on the official website: "Protest messages and phone calls can be made, but cancelling advertising showed things went too far and a social climate that does not tolerate criticism has been created."¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ JoongAng Ilbo, February 13, 2004, in Chekar and Kitzinger 2007.

¹⁸⁹ Korea Herald, February 16, 2004, in Chekar and Kitzinger 2007.

¹⁹⁰ Chekar and Kitzinger 2007.

¹⁹¹ The Chosun Ilbo, December 5, 2005: "Cloning Pioneer 'Just Wanted to Leave it All Behind'".

¹⁹² News Guandong, December 2, 2005: "Disgraced Stem Cell Pioneer Seen As a Hero".

On December 12th, SNU said it would start an investigation, and three days later the MBC broadcasted the interview with the former colleague that claimed he had doctored the photos. On December 29th, the university determined that all of the 11 stem cell lines were fabricated.

In the aftermath, the discourse of national pride was turned into a discourse of national shame and trauma and the virtues of “Korean qualities”, such as “the hungry spirit”, previously praised as essential to Korean achievements and manifested in Hwang and his enterprise, were debated¹⁹³.

Market forces and nationalism

In Korea, popular outcry and a powerful conservative pro-business media playing on nationalist sentiments almost hindered serious research fraud from being brought into daylight. But when nationalist sentiments got out of hand, even the President, who had invested much confidence and money in Hwang, stepped forward to protect values of a healthy public debate. For the liberal Roh, with a background as a labour lawyer, it was probably a quite natural step to take after all. His tragic suicide in May 2009, a result of the intense pressure the incoming government of Lee Myung-bak put on him and his supporters,¹⁹⁴ may serve as another example to illustrate the difficulties of being a liberal voice in a country where the conservative forces are as massive as in Korea.

In the end, the independent progressive media was able to disclose the hollowness of some of Korea’s “scientific achievements.” The fraud it uncovered was of a dimension neither the conservative media nor the government could afford to cover up.

Concluding notes

In this thesis, I have examined how two Chinese newspapers covered the two largest public health crises in the reform-era. In a Habermasian spirit I have tried to consider the characteristics and the condition of the Chinese public sphere by looking at its institutional framework, the participants’ statuses, which topics were discussed and the inclusiveness of the debates. I have also closely examined the language in the articles and usage of particular terms.

I have showed how the persistence of traditional institutional arrangements of the media ensure that the party-state still has much control of public discourse on topics

¹⁹³ Chekar and Kitzinger 2007.

¹⁹⁴ Suh 2010

of public interest, such as politics. Yet, market reform and the emergence of investigating journalism in papers such as Nanfang Zhoumo have led to a widening of the topics to be discussed within the limits of censorship.

During the milk scandal, the official party paper Renmin Ribao aired more voices and discussed more topics with a wider sets of opinions than it did during SARS. Still, the extensive use of unchallenged ideographs were serious hinders for a rational debate. I have showed how the word "science" and later the concept "scientific development" were utilised in several ways in order to give legitimacy to the Party and the current leadership, but without being clearly defined. It seems, however, that pointing out responsibilities and underlining measures taken, such as removing people from their jobs or stripping them of party posts, were somewhat more acceptable in 2008.

Both in 2003 and 2008, the consumers as a group got a special attention in the Renmin Ribao, and in 2008 violations against the consumers set off critique towards several aspects of the current system by its commenting journalists.

That being said, access to the debate in the Renmin Ribao was largely limited to official sources. I have shown how foreign governments and international organisations, such as the WHO, were quoted, but in a strongly selective way. The same was true for foreign media, which was usually brought in as proof either of hostile foreign actors attacking China or as supporting friends. Most of the nationalist sentiments I identified were propelled by articles in foreign media, including Taiwanese papers.

In the Nanfang Zhoumo, a much wider range of voices were included, such as poor peasants or "people in the street." The journalists themselves became important witnesses through vivid reports based on their own observations in the field. Sensitive topics were discussed and new connections brought into the light in a critical manner. The paper was obviously restricted by censorship, but in restrictive periods it reported about the events between the lines. At the same time, the Nanfang Zhoumo actively advocated for more government openness, a more responsible media and, although in a less direct manner, more freedom of the press.

In Habermas's theory, the ideal public sphere is one where citizens are able to influence rulers through the power of the best argument. The extent to which the debates in the Nanfang Zhoumo or other liberal papers are able to do this is hard to measure. I have nevertheless shown that when information that might hurt the Party and its position were brought into the open it was hard for the Party to simply ignore it.

At the same time, it is not given that the liberal views expressed in Nanfang Zhoumo find resonance with the population at large and their perceptions of what is best for them and their country. Nationalism and patriotism are strongly rooted sentiments that should not be ignored. Nor should the fact that journalists with a strictly “professionalist” approach to their role belong to the rarities, even though an investigative culture has emerged in some papers the recent years. Not only is their traditional role to support the Party, most journalists also belong to the urban middle class that has gained from the market reforms and the economical growth the later years. This may serve as an additional explanation to why the Party still is able to mainly control the press through the most effective way – self-censorship.

So, what effect did those particular scandals and the reporting on them have on the climate of the public sphere in China? First, I believe that SARS was a serious eye-opener for the new leadership in Beijing, showing that its traditional approach to “risk communication,” that put political stability before access to information, no longer served the Party’s interest as well as it had during the Mao-years. By declaring a situation of crisis, however, the central leadership were given the opportunity to more effectively make local and provincial governments implement otherwise unpopular policies. Secondly, the tainted milk scandal made food safety into a politically correct topic to discuss, and journalists were given the task to make sure similar cases were revealed. I believe this is closely connected to the fact that the group affected by contaminated food are not just ordinary people, but also consumers, and consumers have a special position in a society where the legitimacy of the ruling party largely rests upon its ability to sustain economic growth. Thirdly, I have observed how a discourse of “openness,” that was the domain of the Nanfang Zhoumo in 2008, had moved into the columns of Renmin Ribao and into the speeches of the top leaders in Beijing. The “openness” of the official discourse did not, however, refer to any kind of political reform in the direction of a free press or freedom of expression, but rather to a more efficient government.

In the sense that a larger variety of topics have been opened for discussion and inquiry, the scandals can be said to have brought a strengthening of the public sphere in China. At the same time, a more proactive and humble central government that talks about openness and accountability may have strengthened the legitimacy and power of the Party, which do not have political reforms on its agenda for the time being.

Finally, the example from South Korea shows that wide and inclusive public debate may also be under pressure in a democratic country where freedom of the press is institutionalised.

In South Korea, it was not state censorship, but strong pressure from commercial interests and the dominating nationalist ideology that, through a powerful conservative press, endangered an inclusive public sphere and almost led to silencing the critique against the cheating scientist. Still, the existence of independent actors like PD Notebook, that were able to stand up to the dominant powers, made sure the accusations of fraud eventually won through.

In China, state censorship put restrictions on the work of the press when covering the scandals, as shown in this paper. But commercialisation and nationalism have also had impact on the public sphere in China. Many have argued for the positive effects commercialisation of Chinese media has had on the diversity and inclusiveness of the public sphere. Owners (usually local governments) and journalists have both gotten new roles and incentive patterns that in turn have brought about more liberal publications and investigative journalism.

Nationalism is a strongly rooted sentiment in China as well, that affects media discourse and thus the public sphere. It can be played upon to rally support and unity, but at the same time, the government needs to curb popular outbursts of nationalism that may hurt China's image abroad or the position of the leadership at home.

Tables

Table 1: Sources used in the two papers when covering the SARS outbreak

Category	Renmin	Per cent	Nanfang	Per cent
Central government (Wen Jiabao, State council, departments etc.)	70	20.2%	4	7.4%
Local governments (province and city, incl. Hong Kong and Taiwan)	35	10.1%	7	13.0%
Chinas president and Party leader, Hu Jintao, Politburo	7	2.0%	1	1.9%
The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)	18	5.2%	1	1.9%
Hospital administration/leadership	23	6.6%	4	7.4%
Experts (scholars/psychologists/experts on Chinese medicine etc.)	20	5.8%	5	9.3%
Medical doctors	12	3.5%	2	3.7%
Nurses	13	3.8%		
Recovered patients	11	3.2%		
Patient's relatives	2	0.6%		
Relatives of health personnel	5	1.4%		
Common people/people on the street	4	1.2%	17	31.5%
Chinese organisations	1	0.3%		
Chinese companies	2	0.6%	4	7.4%
Other Chinese medias	7	2.0%	4	7.4%
World Health Organisation	27	7.8%	1	1.9%
Foreign governments (incl. diplomatic envoys)	33	9.5%		
Foreign companies	2	0.6%		
Foreign organisations (incl. Hong Kong based)	4	1.2%		
Foreign research institutes	4	1.2%		
Foreign newspapers + foreign journalists questions at press conferences (incl. Hong Kong)	28	8.1%		
Commentaries by the papers journalists (or articles with a strong commenting character)	14	4.0%	2	3.7%
Commentaries from external actors (incl. Xinhua)	4	1.2%	2	3.7%
Total number of sources per paper/100%	346	100.0%	54	100.0%
	Total	Per art.	Total	Per art.
Total number of articles per paper/Number of sources per article:	220	1.57	16	3.38

Table 2: Sources used in the two papers when covering the tainted milk scandal

Category	Renmin	Per cent	Nanfang	Per cent
Central government (Wen Jiabao, State council, departments etc.)	46	32.6%	3	5.8%
Local governments (province and city, incl. Hong Kong and Taiwan)	29	20.6%	1	1.9%
AQSIQ	15	10.6%	5	9.6%
Internal control actors	1	0.7%	1	1.9%
Hospital administration/leadership	2	1.4%		
Experts (scholars/psychologists/experts on Chinese medicine etc.)	7	5.0%	7	13.5%
Lawyers			4	7.7%
Health personnel	2	1.4%		
Patient's relatives	1	0.7%	1	1.9%
Shop staff	2	1.4%		
Common people, people on the street, customer	4	2.8%		
Chinese organisations incl. interest groups and provisional associations	9	6.4%	9	17.3%
Chinese companies, dairy producers, milk stations, dairy farmers	10	7.1%	11	21.2%
Other Chinese medias	1	0.7%	2	3.8%
World Health Organisation	1	0.7%		
Foreign media (incl. Hong Kong)	1	0.7%		
Commentaries by the papers journalists (or articles with a strong commenting character)	10	7.1%	7	13.5%
Commentaries from external actors (incl. Xinhua)			1	1.9%
Total number of sources per paper/100%	141	100.0%	52	100.0%
	Total	Per art.	Total	Per art.
Total number of articles per paper/Number of sources per article:	98	1.44	18	2.89

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