

Book Review

David Bandurski and Martin Hala (eds), *Investigative Journalism in China: Eight Cases in Chinese Watchdog Journalism*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010, 184 pp. + vi

reviewed by
Wong Kok Keong*
Sunway University

This well conceived, richly documented and highly engaging volume is a must-read for anyone interested in journalism and China. Eight of the ten chapters are case studies of investigative journalism highlighting different issues and challenges Chinese journalists confront in their valiant effort to try and serve the role of fourth estate in Communist-controlled China. The introductory chapter, while offering a synopsis of each of the chapters, provides a much needed historical time frame to situate the development of investigative journalism. It is a development that does not follow a linear progression and is deeply tied to the dynamic, often times contradictory, forces of authoritarian control of the media/press by the ruling, or pretty much, the only political party (Chinese Communist Party) and a marketplace economy that the CCP has tried to harness for China's economic development. The chapter also briefly touches on the Internet and the rise of citizen journalists performing their own investigations of alleged wrongdoing. The concluding chapter offers a fitting wrap-up by pointing to the continuing influence of the Communist leadership on watchdog reporting: Chinese investigative journalism that has manifested in *yulun jiandu* (or supervision by public opinion), *yulun diaoxiang* (guidance of public opinion), and *yidi jiandu* (extra-regional media supervision); and what some of the more dedicated investigative journalists did to get around governmental "supervision" or "guidance".

China is still communist, politically, and increasingly capitalist, economically, today. Media are required to follow the dictates of the Communist Party or government and expected to rely on commercial sources of funding, e.g., advertising, that emphasizes large audience. It is this political and economic mix that has increasingly shaped the character and practice of investigative journalism. But the book is quick to remind that this does not mean investigative journalism needs the introduction of capitalism to be practiced. While this suggests the universal call of journalism to give voice to the

powerless and to uncover injustices perpetrated by the powerful, the book is equally quick to point out that Chinese investigative journalism has differences compared to the more liberal Western approach even though some Chinese journalists are known to watch and learn from the U.S. TV news show *60 Minutes*. All this offers a good reminder that investigative journalism might be more openly practiced in the West (if it is actually pursued especially in this age of media commercialism and corporate media) but one would be remiss in thinking investigative journalism has been non-existent in Communist China prior to opening its doors to capitalism since the 1980s.

This is actually part of the message of a highly engaging, even scary, account of a case study on the spread of HIV through blood donations (Chapter 2). Months before a *New York Times* reporter covered the story and made it global, some Chinese reporters, especially Zhang Jicheng, already had done the hard work in their investigation that first took them to Henan, a remote rural area of China. In the end, the *New York Times* reporter was the only one showered with praise by Asia Society and awarded the Osborn Elliott Prize for Excellence for Asian Journalism. This particular episode also points to a troubling irony. Even though Chinese reports on the matter had stirred up deep concern among a huge Chinese population it was not taken seriously by the Chinese government at the national level to take actions until the *New York Times* report appeared.

Sometimes, however, Communist leadership at the national level might have the will to involve journalists to help get them close to what the general public might be thinking, saying or demanding. A very good example is the fight against corruption at the regional or local levels of government that is the focus of another case study (Chapter 7). Indeed, at times, the Communist leadership is open to investigative journalism as a way of responding to public outcry against corruption. But this by no means is making things easier for investigative reporters. Rather, they often would be faced with all kinds of resistance and threats due to political patronage enjoyed by lower-level government officials from those higher up in the Communist Party hierarchy. For the higher-ups to be publicly exposed to have linkage with the corrupt officials would be a loss of face and political advancements up the party hierarchy.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, government or party officials often have control of the courts to protect their own vested interest, as made clear in a case (chapter 1) involving a woman peasant who was attacked with concentrated sulfuric acid. While evidence made available through investigative reporting by Lu Yuegang of *China Youth Daily* identified highly placed local government officials as the culprit, the woman did not see justice done. On the other hand, Wang Baojiang, who was accused by the woman and backed up with evidence from Lu's investigation, sued Lu and *China Youth Daily* for libel,

and won. The court did not dare touch him because he was a permanent fixture of local politics and had deep political ties to the Communist Party.

But while “political considerations often override the truth” (p. 31), that’s not to say government/party officials would always get off scot-free. One such case (chapter 7) involves Li Zhen. His name first surfaced when China’s number one news agency Xinhua offered a terse, routine report about him as “a relatively low-level cadre from Hebei Province” (p. 127) being expelled from the Communist Party for bribery and illegally possessing public and private property. Mainland Chinese media followed up on it by focusing on the magnitude of the bribery (8.68 million yuan) and illegal possession of property (10.5 million yuan). A Hong Kong paper took a different approach. It labeled the scandal as “the biggest political earthquake to hit Hebei in the era of economic reforms” and suggested “the existence of an extended web of corruption in Hebei Province” that could very well implicate more high-level officials (p. 127). Enter *Lifeweek*, a leading Beijing-based weekly news magazine. The editors initially did not give Li’s story much attention and did not think it would get readers’ interest. However, when report by the Hong Kong paper left lingering questions, the magazine decided to give it more attention. As they dug more into the story, the more they realized the severity of the situation. *Lifeweek* reports steadily increased their readership. But that alone was not enough to eventually get the court to convict Li and sentenced him to death. Rather, the peculiar role of *neican* was important here. A significant part of the political life since the creation of Communist China in 1949, *neican* offers “party and government officials with facts and commentary on key issues deemed too sensitive for the news page” (p. 135). Media editors who regard a story as too risky for a public audience could send it to their *neican* editor to polish it up for a select group of officials. Li’s downfall could just as much be due to his transgression as a lowly official who amassed great wealth through corruption that could potentially bring down many high-level officials.

But China’s corruption could also be found in the corporate world as illustrated by the case of the Beijing taxi corruption (Chapter 5). Investigative reports through a weekly supplement to *China Economic Times* featured widespread corruption at the top with the taxi drivers having to put up with blatant abuses or exploitations. The reports drew large readership. Even a few top members of the Communist Party had expressed their dissatisfaction with the taxi situation. But this was only up to a point because when the staff of the weekly supplement soon requested the government to extend their frequency of publication, they were rebuked with a stern question: “Who said you could do a report on Beijing’s Taxi industry?”

The eight case studies of investigative journalism clearly show that Chinese investigative reporters had to walk constantly on egg shells to do

what is right for the people of China. As much as the book accounts for the state and practice of China's investigative journalism, it also, to its credit, draws readers in with its concern about the watchdog reporters themselves – how they went about performing their investigative reporting and what has happened to them after their reports were published – because these reporters, unlike those in the West, do not get paid much to begin with and constantly risk retaliation from governmental officials upset with their investigating and reporting.

Note

- * Dr Wong Kok Keong 黃國強 has taught at Monash University, Sunway Campus, and currently lectures at Sunway University, Malaysia. He holds a BA in Journalism (1984) and MA in Mass Communication (1986) from Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and PhD in International Mass Communication & Culture (1990) from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts. From 1990 to 2011 Dr Wong taught at St. Norbert College, De Pere, Wisconsin, United States of America, where he was an Associate Professor from 1994. <Email: wongkk@sunway.edu.my>