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**Complex Roles of Chinese Media:
Regional Variation of Party Newspaper's
Attitudes towards Government Agencies**

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Abstract

In China, party newspapers constitute main part of mainstream media, thus playing an important role in reporting political issues related to Chinese governments. Chinese party newspapers are supposed to supervise and monitor lower-ranked government agencies. The effectiveness of such supervising role depends on the relative power, i.e. the hierarchical distance between the newspaper and the targeted agency. Therefore, we should expect city-level party newspapers are more critical on district level or township level governments than city-level ones, because the latter has a more balanced power relation to the newspaper. Our assumption is confirmed by developing an index to evaluate media's attitude towards government agencies, coupled with our content analysis on two party newspapers, Beijing Daily & Guangzhou Daily, in recent 2 years. However, we also discover that Guangzhou Daily casts more criticism onto city-level officials than Beijing Daily does, in that Guangzhou has a more competitive and civic-engaging media environment. This result shows that the regime's expectation of the media's function is redirected by local social conditions.

Keywords: Chinese media, Media roles, Party paper.

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Introduction

Confined with China's special social context, the development of China's journalism represents a unique feature. Unlike the western media pursuing social responsibility and trying to keep relatively independent from the political and economic forces, Chinese media has been institutionally a part of national apparatus, supervised and guided by the Party's propaganda since the foundation of People's Republic of China. Its political anchoring determines that Chinese media complies with national or local political objectives and execute political propaganda tasks as its prime work, by positioning as the Party's propagandist (Liu, 1971). On the flip side, the reform and opening up policy in China after 1978, favors the thrive of marketism, furtherly stimulates the gradual opening of media environment. With the introduction of professional journalism and the development of journalism education, Chinese media has been undertaking reforms, pursuing economic profits and trying to establish a professional code of conduct in order to play a role in public service and public opinion.

However, affected by the organizational situation, history legacies and many other factors, the reform of Chinese media actually is conducted under the auspices and supervision of the government. It is a process that the government gradually incorporates market forces into Journalism in order to maintain its political power (Pan, 2005; Li, 2004). Chinese media is still supervised and managed by party-state, and the party's media (newspaper, television and radio) still occupies the prime position in the current media market. Therefore, in the dual logics of the subordination of party-state management and the self-pursuit of professional journalism, the process of Chinese media reform is filled with contradictions and ambiguities (Lee, 1994). Compared with western media, Chinese media plays a unique and complex role: it both carries out political propaganda tasks as the Party's voice tool, and obtains economic benefits by meeting advertisers' needs as a market operator. Meanwhile, a professional target is pursuit to be a public instrument and watch-keeper in order to serve the public and supervise the policies and governing behaviors of the government as a benchmark. Such positioning of Chinese media directly leads to an ambivalent attitude towards governments and juxtapositions of political propagandas and poignant remarks in the reports.

Basic questions need to be clarified about Chinese media: What is the Chinese media's attitude towards governments in the current reports? Are there differences in attitude towards governments among different local media in their reports? If so, what factors lead to these differences? This paper addresses these questions by interpreting evidences from both content analysis and discourse analysis. Two party newspapers' reports will be compared and analyzed by using an index to evaluate media's attitude towards government agencies. Furtherly, the paper discusses the key factors affecting media's news production.

Literature Review

Media Sociology and News Production

Studies in the perspective of media sociology outline the architecture of the media field and explain news production according to the structural conditions within that field (Benson 2006; Bourdieu 2005). According to this study, news production is influenced by both internal factors and external factors of media organization. Internal factors include journalist's cognition of professional role, developing goals of organization. External factors include national communication management system, social and cultural environment, economic forces (Pan, 2005; McQuail, 1992; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

As for Chinese media, confined to Chinese unique media environment, the national communication management system and the supervision conducted by the Party are key factors that influence their news production. As a top official from the State Press and Publication Administration Administration (SPPA) declared (Su, 2004), "no matter how much the managerial mechanisms of the media change, the Party's control over the media, the cadres who manage the media, the ideological direction of the media, and the properties of media organizations will not change." In 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated the core principle of reports that Chinese media must follow is Party's lead.

Agenda Setting and Framing

Agenda-setting theory describes the "ability [of the news media] to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda". At the first level of agenda-setting, media agenda can set the significance of some issues by the volume of coverage, further to influence the public concerns and their judgment on importance of issues. At the second level of agenda-setting, media agenda can affect public judgment on the attributes of a certain object through information structure (McCombs, 2005). Specifically, this process is to set some report frames, which can help choose, emphasize and exclude news and issues, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993; Chen, 2007). Generally speaking, the frame of media coverage can be described in four dimensions: (1) selection of news content, (2) length and position, (3) details selected (4) emotion tones (Ghanem, 1997).

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis aims at exploring the meaning and structure of mass media information, which can be examined at the levels of texts and contexts. At the level of text, we will analyze different structures of news discourse, which include both microstructures such as words, sentences, syntax, semantics, and macrostructures such as discourse organization rules, meaning or content themes. At the level of context, we aim at analyzing the production process of this text structure: Which cognitive and social factors help form news text? (Van Dijk, 1987)

Hypotheses

Based on the theory and literature discussed above, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1. The higher the level of government is, the more types of reports there will be.

H2. The higher the level of government is, the more noticeable positions the relative reports will sit on the newspaper.

H3. The lower the level of government is, the more critical the reports will be.

H4. The higher the level of government is, the more possible that the media resource is government itself.

H5. The higher the level of government is, the more reports there will be.

H6. The lower the level of government is, the more negative the government role in the reports will be.

Methods

To test these hypotheses, this study makes a content analysis on two party newspapers in recent 2 years, Beijing Daily & Guangzhou Daily. The unit of analysis is the news report.

Sample

This article chooses Beijing Daily and Guangzhou Daily as research objects, because Beijing and Guangzhou are representative in political control, penetration of market economy, and media development. In terms of this, the news production and attitudes towards governments of these two Party newspapers represent the current situation of Chinese Party newspapers.

Beijing is the capital and political center of China. The action of Beijing municipal government reflects the reform trend of central government, and imposes demonstration and guidance on local governments, so do the reports of Party newspaper. Reports in Beijing Daily represent reports in Chinese media; Guangzhou Daily is one of the trailblazers in the reform of Chinese Party newspaper, whose methods and ideas of news reports and media management are pioneering in China. Therefore, Guangzhou Daily can represent the development direction of professionalism of Chinese Party newspaper.

In selecting the sample, in order to highlight the features of reports which governments are concerned, this research selects samples across two dimensions: agenda and timeline. In the agenda dimension, because governments, media, and the public emphasized on environment issues in recent years, this article chooses the environment reports in Beijing Daily and Guangzhou Daily as the sample. In the timeline dimension, considering that Chinese reports inspect work of government departments, such as the NPC and

CPPCC, across certain time period, the reports in our sample are across Jan 1st 2013 to Dec 31st 2014, a time period which perceivably covers all important time points.

This article overall chose 615 reports in Beijing Daily and 709 reports in Guangzhou Daily, in total of 1324 reports.

Variables

According to the research, the data were divided into three parts: expression forms, emotion propensity, and content attributes.

Expression Forms

Report Type. According to the type division of reports and the observation of relevant agenda reports, we set message, newsletter (or feature), in-depth report (including exclusive interview and investigative reporting), comment (or review), science and research article, and others.

Edition Position. In order to facilitate the comparison, this article records all the edition numbers of the reports.

Emotion Propensity

These refer to the positions, attitudes, and emotions of reports. This article divides them into three categories: (1) positive, means the report holds an optimistic attitude towards or gives a positive comment to the events and the actions; (2) negative, means the report holds a denying attitude towards or gives a pessimistic comment to the events and the actions; (3) neutral, means the report shows no attitudinal tendency to the events and the actions.

Content Attributes of Reports

Sources of information. This variable refers to the clues and sources from which media get the information. According to the observation of text, we divide this variable into eight categories: government, social organization, media, enterprise, public opinion leader, the general public, international forces, and others.

Core reported objects. This variable refers to the main behavior subjects which disclose facts to the public. According to the observation of relevant articles, we divide core reported object into six categories: government, enterprise, civil organization, public figure, the public, international subject. Combined with the research purpose and research problems, we further divide government into four categories according to its level: central and provincial government, municipal government, county-level government, and grass-root government (township and under-township level). When the relevant subjects (or government levels) of a report are more than one category, we will choose the most important three subjects (or government levels) as the relevant subjects. Besides, this article also codes the highest level of the relevant governments in the reports: 0 (no government mentioned in the report), 1 (grass-root government), 2 (county-level government), 3 (municipal government), 4 (central and provincial government).

Subject behaviors. When designing this variable, the article follows the general procedures of content analysis study. We conduct the pre-research on a part of the sample by reading and analyzing, and induce the images of subjects in the reports. At the end, we summarize 5-10 adjectives which can best embody the images of subjects. On this basis, we divide the subject behaviors into the specific categories. For example, the behaviors of government include: (1) absence of efficient policy, (2) economic growth prioritized, (3) poor supervision, (4) weak propaganda, (5) insufficient disclosure, (6) making policy and regulation, (7) enhancing supervision, (8) improving environment, (9) transparent information, (10) scientific development; (11) international cooperation, (12) listening to public opinion, (13) others.

Results

Expression Forms of Reports Related to Different Levels of Governments in Party Newspapers

Types of Reports Related to Governments in Party Newspapers

In environmental scenario, the Party newspaper reported governments mainly in the form of message (79.1%), while other forms including newsletter (10.7%), comment (5.5%), in-depth report (2.9%), science and research article (0.7%) represent a smaller proportion. This, to some extent, reflects a problem in current media reports in China: Chinese media focus on the recording of government work, typical figures and events. Correspondingly, they are lack of evaluating government work, digging deeper into the events, or using comments, science and research articles to output information (Huang & Liu, 2014). Attributing to this inertia of Chinese media, the types of reports related to different levels of governments normally comply with this reporting custom (Table 1). Not much differences are seen among different levels of governments, failing to support H1.

Table 1. *Types of Reports Related to Different Levels of Governments*

	Message	Newsletter	In-depth Report	Comment	Science and Research Articles	Others
Central and Provincial Government	182 (80.5%)	7 (3.1%)	7 (3.1%)	27 (11.9%)	3 (1.3%)	0 (0)
Municipal Government	702 (79.3%)	93 (10.5%)	30 (3.4%)	51 (5.8%)	3 (0.3%)	6 (0.7%)
County-level Government	176 (73.6%)	42 (17.6%)	9 (3.8%)	3 (1.3%)	1 (0.4%)	8 (3.3%)
Grass-root Government	42 (73.7%)	10 (17.5%)	4 (7.0%)	1 (1.8%)	0 (0)	0 (0)

Notes: The numerical values in the table are the number of reports of certain type related to certain government level; the percentage is the number of reports of certain type in the number of all reports related to certain level of governments.

Edition Arrangement of the Party Newspaper for the Reports Related to Different Levels of Governments

This article analyzed the relation between the edition numbers of reports and the highest levels of related governments. We conduct the correlation analysis of these two variables in Beijing Daily and Guangzhou Daily respectively, and we get a remarkably negative correlation (Table 2). This means the higher the levels of government are, the smaller the edition numbers of reports will be, in other words, media will give the more important positions to the higher levels of governments, thus verifying H2.

Table 2. *Pearson Correlation Coefficients for the Edition Positions and the Highest Levels of Related Governments*

Beijing Daily	Guangzhou Daily
Edition Position	Edition Position
The Highest Levels of Governments - 0.198 ^c	The Highest Levels of Governments - 0.156 ^c

Notes: ^ap < 0.05, ^bp < 0.01, ^cp < 0.001.

Emotion Propensity of the Reports Related to Different Levels of Governments in Party Newspapers

Through the statistical analysis of emotional tones, we can infer the macroscopic and integral evaluation of the Party newspapers on different levels of governments. According to the statistic result, we find the followings: first, the Party newspapers give more positive evaluations than negative evaluations to the governments overall. In the sample, the majority of the Emotion propensity of the reports related to governments is either positive or neutral, and their percentages are respectively 45.5% and 44.2%. The negative reports (critical reports) only represent 10.4% in all reports. Second, there are differences between the attitudes of the Party's newspapers towards different levels of governments. When we conduct cross analysis of the two indexes, emotion propensity and levels of governments, we find that as the levels of governments drop, the negative evaluations on governments increase (Table 3). Therefore, we can conclude that H3 is tenable.

Table 3. *Emotional Tones of the Reports Related to Different Levels of Governments*

	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Central and Provincial Government	80 (35.4%)	23 (10.2%)	123 (54.4%)
Municipal Government	382 (43.2%)	79 (8.9%)	423 (47.9%)
County-level Government	148 (62.2%)	27 (11.3%)	63 (26.5%)
Grass-root Government	30 (52.6%)	15 (26.3%)	12 (21.1%)

Notes: The numerical values in the table are the number of the reports in certain emotional tones related to certain government level; the percentage is the number of reports in certain emotional tones in the number of all reports related to certain level of governments.

Content Attributes of the Reports Related to Different Levels of Governments in Party Newspapers

Emphasis of Party Newspapers on Different Social Subjects

The emphasis of Party newspapers on social subjects such as governments, enterprises, and the public can be concluded from the source of information and core reported objects: Who sets the agenda for media? Who is the media agenda for?

In terms of information sources of environmental reports in the Party newspaper, governments (73.3%) take up the majority proportion. The following two sources are media (21.8%) and the public (3.1%), and the reports whose sources of information are social organizations, enterprises, public opinion leaders and international forces take up no more than 1% respectively. In terms of core reported objects, governments occupy 95.4%. The following two objects are enterprises (22.8%) and the public (15.3%). The reports whose core objects are social organization, public figure, international subject respectively occupy around 1% in the total reports.

The distributions of information sources and reported objects are of course related to the nature of environmental agenda and the characteristic of government operations: government, as the subject to carry out work, is the ultimate source of all kinds of information; other social subjects not only play a limited role in the actual work, but also lack first-hand information. However, media's heavy reliance on governments in getting information and capturing report objects, also demonstrate the previous assumption: Chinese media is mostly influenced by political forces in information dissemination activities.

The Strength Reported of Different Levels of Governments in Party Newspapers

Specific to government level, there are differences in the report strength among different levels of governments: first, the report strength of the governments at higher levels in Party newspapers is moderate, and the relevant reports account for only 17.8% of all the reports. Second, the report strength of local governments obviously decreases as the government level drops. The ratios of the reports of municipal governments, county-level governments and grass-root governments are respectively 69.6%, 18.8% and 4.5%. Meanwhile, after we conducted variance analysis on "sources of information" and "levels of governments related to the reports", we found that sources of information significantly affected the levels of governments related to the reports (Table 4). The media tend to use governments as the source when reporting higher levels of governments and to use the public and other media as the sources when reporting lower levels of governments (Table 5). Thus we can infer that H4 and H5 are validated.

Table 4. ANOVA for the Effects of Sources of Information on the Levels of Governments Related to the Reports

Source of variance	Sum-of-squares	d f	Mean square	F	p
Central and Provincial Government	3.769	6	0.628	2.743	0.013
Municipal Government	8.179	6	1.363	6.294	0.000
County-level Government	6.405	6	1.067	7.421	0.000
Grass-root Government	3.49	4	0.872	4.538	0.002

Table 5. The Relationship Between Sources of Information and the Levels of Governments Related to the Reports

	Government	Social Organization	Media	Enterprise	Public Opinion Leader	The Public	International Forces
Central and Provincial Government	178 (78.8%)	1 (0.4%)	45 (19.9%)	0 (0)	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)	0 (0)
Municipal Government	678 (76.6%)	3 (0.3%)	183 (20.7%)	3 (0.3%)	4 (0.5%)	13 (1.5%)	1 (0.1%)
County-level Government	150 (62.8%)	0 (0)	65 (27.2%)	3 (1.3%)	0 (0)	21 (8.8%)	0 (0)
Grass-root Government	29 (50.9%)	0 (0)	15 (26.3%)	0 (0)	0 (0)	13 (22.8%)	0 (0)

Notes: The numerical values in the table are the number of the reports from certain sources related to certain government level; the percentage is the number of reports from certain sources in the number of all reports related to certain level of governments.

Behaviors of Different Levels of Governments in the Reports in Party Newspapers

In this part, we focus on analyzing the images of government which are frequently mentioned in media reports (Table 6).

First, with the declining of the levels of governments, the composition of government images shows a trend of simplification. In the sample, media reports mentioned 13 kinds of behaviors of municipal governments while much less kinds of behaviors are mentioned of county-level governments and grass-root governments.

Second, behaviors of different levels of governments are mostly same but emphasized differently. In the background that Chinese environment is deteriorating and public's demands for green development are increasing, enhancing supervision, improving environment and scientific development are the focus of government work and media reports. On the flip side, for higher levels of governments who can make strategies and policies, media focuses more on policy making and ideological propaganda. For the grass-root

governments who can only undertake detailed work, media focuses more on their policy execution, administrative actions, and responsiveness to public opinions. For example, the reports of environmental issues present more behaviors of “making policy and regulation” and “raising information transparency” when reporting municipal governments, and more behaviors of “listening to the public” when reporting grass-root governments. At the same time, corresponding to the emotional tendencies to different levels of governments, with the drop of the government level, negative images such as “economy growth first”, “poor supervision” and “insufficient disclosure” are increasing. This also confirms H6.

Table 6. *Behaviors of Different Levels of Governments in the Reports in Party Newspapers*

	Municipal Government	County-level Government	Grass-root Government
Absence of policy	4	0	0
	(0.5%)	(0)	(0)
Economy growth first	15	2	1
	(1.7%)	(0.8%)	(1.8%)
Poor supervision	81	24	15
	(9.2%)	(10.0%)	(26.3%)
Weak propaganda	3	0	0
	(0.3%)	(0)	(0)
Insufficient disclosure	12	1	1
	(1.4%)	(0.4%)	(1.8%)
Making policy and regulation	215	13	2
	(24.3%)	(5.4%)	(3.5%)
Enhancing supervision	439	123	24
	(49.6%)	(51.5%)	(42.1%)
Improving environment	515	155	32
	(58.2%)	(64.9%)	(56.1%)
Transparent information	344	49	8
	(38.9%)	(20.5%)	(14.0%)
Scientific development	182	48	15
	(20.6%)	(20.1%)	(26.3%)
International cooperation	13	0	1
	(1.5%)	(0)	(1.8%)
Listening to public opinion	56	27	5
	(6.3%)	(11.3%)	(8.8%)
Others	77	21	14
	(8.7%)	(8.8%)	(24.6%)

Notes: The numerical values in the table are the number of the reports in which certain level of governments show certain behavior; the percentage is the number of reports in which certain level of governments show certain behavior in the number of all reports of certain level of governments.

Comparison Between the Reports of Beijing Daily and the Reports of Guangzhou Daily

Are the attitudes of reports towards governments same in the Party newspapers of different areas? To answer this question, we analyze the

“emotional tendency” and “sources of information”, and we find that there are differences between two newspapers in attitudes towards governments generally ($p=0.000$). Beijing Daily more tends to give positive evaluations on governments, with positive reports account for 62.5% of all reports. While in the reports of Guangzhou Daily, there are more neutral reports (57.4%) and negative reports (12.0%) (Table 7).

Table 7. *Comparison of the Emotional Tendencies Between the Reports of Beijing Daily and the Reports of Guangzhou Daily*

	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Beijing Daily	384	52	178
	(62.5%)	(8.5%)	(29.0%)
Guangzhou Daily	217	85	407
	(30.6%)	(12.0%)	(57.4%)

Notes: The numerical values in the table are the number of the reports with certain emotional tendency in certain newspaper; the percentage is the number of reports with certain emotional tendency in certain newspaper in the number of all reports in certain newspaper.

Discussion

Through analyzing the characteristics of the reports related to governments in Chinese Party newspapers, we found significant differences between different levels of governments in terms of edition arrangement, emotional tendency, information source, reported strength, and role evaluation. Therefore, this article reveals the present situation of Chinese Party newspapers: although news production of Chinese media is affected by many factors, giving Chinese media diverse and complex roles in their reports, national media management system is the key factor. Given that Chinese media is subordinate to the party-state system and gets controlled by the government, Chinese media, represented by Party newspapers, hinge more on its political attributes. Based on the propaganda idea of “giving priority to the positive report” in a long time news production history, Chinese media are expected to release positive information to paint a good image for the government when reporting government news. Meanwhile, in China’s current system of media management, media is subordinate to the equivalent level of government and the higher level of the Party’s propaganda department, and is responsible for them. Accordingly, these governments and departments can influence or even control media reports. They can both guide report content by means of administration guidance or serving as information services, and directly delete or revise negative content. As our analysis result finds, Beijing Daily and Guangzhou Daily are only responsible for municipal governments and governments at higher levels, thus giving more positive propaganda to these governments. As for county-level governments and grass-root governments, they don’t have the power to instruct municipal Party newspapers, and most of these governments have canceled Party newspapers at the same level during the government reform, these governments can only use municipal Party

newspapers as the primary channels of outputting information. Such a relationship determines that their influence on Party newspapers is weak, and correspondingly, Party newspapers more tend to supervise these governments.

In the background that reports of Party newspapers are overall affected by national communication management system, there are also differences among the media in different areas in news production. When we compare and analyze the attitudes of Beijing Daily and Guangzhou Daily towards different levels of governments in their reports, we find significant differences. Obviously, Guangzhou Daily is more critical towards governments than Beijing Daily. Further comparison indicates that Beijing has totally different social environment from Guangzhou: besides Beijing's core position as the capital, the present situation of the municipal media in Beijing are almost as same as that of the municipal media in other areas: the strength of political control from the government at the same level is moderate, public's civil consciousness is insufficient, the competition of local market of media is weak, and the professionalism is still in an embryonic edge. However, Guangzhou is regarded as the pioneer in China's reforms and develops well. The political consensus of the local government is more advanced, the government is more tolerant of negative reports, political culture is more mature, the awareness of public participation and supervision is stronger, the competition of market of media is fiercer, the reform of local media began earlier, and professionalism has been formed. The different attitudes towards governments between Beijing Daily and Guangzhou Daily in their reports may indicate that besides the government control, social environment such as public's political culture, level of competition in media market, and the degree of professionalism in media may also influence the news production of Chinese media (Lei, 2013), and this need to be explored in the further research.

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