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Dual Identity and Multiple Tasks: Contemporary Chinese Party Media's Involvement in Political Communication

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ABSTRACT

Alongside the reform and opening-up policies in China since 1978, there has been a transformation of China's governmental functions and of its media system. While adapting to the complex political process towards democratization, the Chinese Communist Party media have further expanded their dual identity as both organizational communicator and mass communicator, and are involved in Chinese political communication in a variety of ways. To improve the role of internal organizational communication, the Party media have extended their sphere of activity from traditional Internal Reference (*xinwen neican* 新闻内参) to Online Public Opinion Monitoring (*yuqing jiance* 輿情监测) and Media Think Tank Consultation (*meiti zhiku* 媒体智库). As leaders in China's market-oriented media reform and tech-driven media integration, the Chinese Party media have remained dominant and privileged agents in China's mass media system, and active participants in social political communication in a number of ways, from traditional policy publicity, to media supervision and timely external opinion guiding.

Keywords: Chinese Party media; functionalism; media policy and system; political communication; public opinion.

Although political communication is the most important branch of communication research, the state of academic research into Chinese political communication is somewhat embarrassing. On the one hand, the huge difference between China's political reality and the electoral politics

of the West makes it difficult to apply the theories and methodologies of Western political communication research to China. On the other hand, it is hard for scholars researching China's political communication to avoid political and ideological interference and highlight its academic value. Thus, it is not easy for Chinese scholars to conduct effective dialogues with either their Western peers or Chinese practitioners.

"The historical context of the development of China's journalism is clearly different from the Western countries we study [...]. In many areas of the world, the role of the state is very different, but in more areas of the world, it is far closer to the centre of the media system structure than in the West" (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The subject of this article has not been taken from a literature review of Western political communication, nor from the use of so-called "advanced" research methods; it is based on long-term observation of the Chinese political reality from the perspective of political communication. We do hope that it will really help to refine the issues of Chinese political communication research and lead to an in-depth academic dialogue and exchange of ideas.

The concept of political communication should be derived from definitions. Among all the definitions of political communication, the author agrees with Nimmo and Sanders' relatively broad saying, "Political communication focuses on communication behaviour and its influence on the political process" (Nimmo and Sanders 1981, 12). This definition reflects the development of politics research from the initial political thought to the political system, and then to the political process and behavioural research.

Although the political process varies significantly from country to country, it is possible to identify and analyze agents of political communication within a specific political process. For that reason, we have chosen to study the dual identity of the Chinese Party's media roles and the way in which they fulfil the function of those roles through undertaking multiple tasks within the contemporary Chinese public policy process.

The term, "Party media" has been coined from a speech by Xi Jinping during a colloquium that he hosted in Beijing on 19 February 2016. During the colloquium, he emphasized that "all media run by the Party and the government are propaganda fronts of the Party and must have 'Party' as their surname" (Li and Huo 2016). Since then, "Party media" has largely replaced the former term "Party newspaper", but until now there has been a lack of academic fruit on the Party media and political communication.

Jing Xu's *Political Communication in the Great Leap Forward Movement*, published in Hong Kong in 2004, did some ground-breaking research in the field of Chinese political communication (Xu 2004, 4-12). It featured an in-depth analysis of the Chinese Party media's communications during the mass political movement of Chairman Mao's era. Well, circumstances change with the passage of time. Since 1978, alongside China's reform and opening-up policies, adapting to the new market economy and international co-operation, China has gradually changed its ideas and practice on governance from strict control to social service.

Following this political transformation, the Chinese Party media have shifted their mission from "serving class struggle" to "serving socialist modernization", and have taken the lead in the media's commercialization reforms and media integration, which have been driven by ICTs since the beginning of this century. The composition of contemporary Chinese media is increasingly diverse in terms of technology, capital resources and operating mechanisms. As a privileged and dominant part of the Chinese media system, the Party media, including the *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, CCTV[1] and many more Party and local governmental organs which constitute China's mainstream media, have undergone substantial change in terms of management ideas, capital composition, operating mechanisms and mediamorphosis. The political partisan nature of the Chinese Party media differentiates them from the Western mainstream media, and also determines their involvement in political communication with uniquely Chinese characteristics. Research on the current political communication of the Party media not only helps to uncover the true nature of Chinese political communication, but also examines the aim of such academic research.

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[1] CCTV has been transformed through the creation of a new central radio and television network, to be known as "Voice of China". It is the amalgamation of China Central Television (including China Global Television Network), China National Radio, and China Radio International, and it now serves as an institution directly under the State Council.

1. CHINA'S PUBLIC POLICY PROCESS AND THE DUAL IDENTITY OF THE PARTY MEDIA

The political process in most countries is usually based on the public policy process. At present, China's public policy-making process still differs in many ways from those in the West. First, it is characterized in practice by a "combination of legislature and administration". The executive government is responsible for decision-making, implementation and major policy revision. As the legislative body, the People's Congress, from national to local level, in reality stands on the "second line". In recent years, with the reform of the government system, the role of the People's Congress has been strengthened, while the government still plays a central and dominant role in the decision-making process.

Second, the phenomenon of "unity of Party and government, with Party leading the government" (He and Kong 2011, 61-79) is quite obvious, and permeates all aspects of the policy-making process, official actions and behaviour. Political stability and the compliance of officials form the principles and basis of decision-making.

Finally, the intersection of "stripes" and "blocks" is a major feature of Chinese government administration. The "stripes" refer to the vertical lines of authority over various sectors, reaching down from the ministries of central government. The "blocks" refer to the horizontal level of authority of territorial government at the provincial or local level (Xue and Chen 2005, 99-103).

Even so, there has been an obvious change in Chinese public policy process in some respects.

During 1980, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs set up the first spokesman system, and regularly released government information. During the SARS outbreak of 2003, the Ministry of Health established its second press release system, in response to public concern. Since then, the theory of governmental responsiveness has gradually emerged. Based on the idea of social governance, it provides a conscious, stable and sustainable governmental response mechanism, providing a people-based, service-oriented response, in good time and within the rule of law. Although the national spokesman system largely reflects the Chinese social management model, overseen by the government as a single function, it is consistent with the concept of service-oriented government, with its focus on improving the government's capability and quality of public service.

In 1987, the 13th National Party Congress highlighted the principle of openness. Since then, China has gradually promoted the publicizing

of government affairs, Party affairs, and judicial openness. With the promulgation and implementation of the "Regulations of Governmental Information Disclosure" in 2007, the Chinese policy-making process has gradually changed from the covert authoritarian or élite decision-making set-up of Mao's era to be more open and public, with institutional norms. Also in 1987, the 13th National Party Congress formally proposed the concept of "public opinion supervision". This was the first time that the concept had been included in the Party's documentation, and provided official assurance with regard to the Party's role in media supervision.

Different countries use different mechanisms in the public policy process, with a number of internal or external participants. In the West, the mass media, as external opinion leaders in policy-making, usually spread information about elections, politics and related public issues. However, the Chinese Party media had always been characterized by internal organizational communication. Moreover, with the development of China's mass media system, originating from the reform and opening-up of 1978, the Chinese Party media have gained important roles within the current media system. In competition with the other media for social news communication, they also function as external opinion leaders for political communication. In China, there are currently two opposing areas of public opinion. One is full of official slogans and discourse, while the other is full of alternative views (He and Chen 2010). For propaganda practitioners, how to bridge the two opinion fields and give full play to the role of the Party media is a major question. From our viewpoint, as researchers, understanding the dual identity of the Party media and their methods of communication may help towards a better understanding of the relationship between the media and public opinion in Chinese political communication.

2. The development of the Chinese Party media

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, under the guidance of Chinese Proletariat Party journalism, with planned top-down, step-by-step adjustments, China has established a centralized and unified national media network, centred on the *People's Daily* (人民日报), the Xinhua News Agency (新华通讯社), and the Central People's Broadcasting Station (中央人民广播电台). The new media system differed in two ways from its pre-1949 predecessor. First, the ownership

system underwent a revolutionary change. Through the confiscation and socialist transformation of the old media, all media had by 1953 become state-owned or at least collective-owned, with no private ownership at all (Fang and Zhang 1998, 389). Second, the structure of the media system was also changed. Organs (*dang bao* 党报) and professional newspapers with a specific readership became the mainstay of the system, while private and independent coterie-run newspapers disappeared.

According to the January 1954 statistics, of the total 258 newspapers above the provincial level, 151 were Party organs, such as the *People's Daily*, which accounted for 58.5% of the total, and ranked first among all types of newspaper in China. This proportion has dropped, year on year, to 31.3%. However, beginning with the Anti-Rightist Campaign (*fanyou yundong* 反右运动) in 1957, the proportion of Party newspapers again rose each year, reaching 75% in 1961 and 84.4% in 1975 (Yu 1993, 16). The Party Central Committee controls the Party media's personnel appointments and the management structure, and has strict regulations on operations. Besides the Party Central Committee newspaper, at the same administrative level, all newspapers, periodicals, radio stations, publishing agencies, and other news and publishing organizations have to be supervised by the propaganda departments of the provincial (municipal) committees. Under the unified leadership of the Party and the government, the national media have formed a well-organized, top-down media communication network for different regions and readerships.

As to the relationship between the Party and the Party newspaper, Party journalism has stated that the Party newspaper must be "a truly militant organ (真正战斗的党的机关报). It is not only to be a propagandist or agitator, but also the organizer for the collective. The collective does not refer to the newsroom co-workers or coterie, but to the entire party organization. Therefore, the party organ is not 'simply a publicity product for external propaganda', but a 'leader of working for both the Party and the masses'". The Party organ should not only explain theories and strategies of Chinese revolution, but also "provide concrete suggestions for comrades to practise". "The Party must use organs to inform and mobilize masses to carry out miscellaneous political activities and movements. Organs are the mouthpiece of the Party. All people working for the organs as part of the Party must follow the will of the Party. Every act and every word must be taken into consideration of the Party's influence". All these quotations from the Party's documents clearly define the role of the party organs as organizational communicators, rather than mass media. In Mao's era, political movements constituted the main con-

tent of China's political life, in which party organs were fully used and gradually strengthened as vehicles for political mobilization and organization (Xu 2004, 4-12).

Since 1978, the relationship between the Party and its media has not changed in principle. However, with the shift of the Party's priorities, the role of the Party media has also shifted from serving the class struggle to serving socialist modernization. At the same time, the media have initiated their own reforms with regard to commercialization and marketization. New accounting systems have been introduced, modern enterprise management has been implemented, and various market-oriented sub-papers have been developed. Advertisements and multiple operations have been widely allowed to increase revenue, and China's media industry has revealed a trend towards conglomeration. During this process, media products and their circulation have increased enormously, while the share of party organs at all levels has steadily declined. In 2013, among the 1,915 types of newspaper published nationwide, there were only 400 Party newspapers, accounting for about 20% in total (China Journalists Association 2014). According to an official statement, China's newspaper industry has gradually achieved a "basic pattern of multi-level and multi-type co-existence, dominated by the party organs, while supplemented by evening newspapers, metropolitan newspapers and industry-specific newspapers/magazines" (China Journalists Association 2017).

During the 1980s, television gradually became the most influential of the media. Due to the huge operating costs the state has played a major role in developing the television industry, and has thus taken control of its development. In 1985, television surpassed radio for the first time in the population coverage range, "becoming the most widely-received and most widespread of the media" (National People's Broadcasting Station National Audience Survey Team 1988, 216). Television programmes are, in fact, more comprehensive, with news programmes accounting for only about 15% of total programmes.

Although the marketization and conglomeration of the Chinese media have a reputation for top-down guidance and control, this does reflect the Party's institutional adaptation to the new trends. The new administrative approval and licensing system for press and publications guarantees that the Party's power should extend to the entire body of the media. In addition, it has also turned the Chinese media industry into a true monopoly market, where the limits of supply and the huge marketing demand for advertising have brought enormous profits to the media.

In 1994, China formally joined the internet, followed by a large number of internet media companies. In 1998, sina.com, sohu.com, and netease.com launched portal websites, one after another. In 2000, they were listed on Nasdaq. At the same time, China announced relevant laws and regulations to clearly license the main body of network news dissemination, especially the private commercial websites, and stipulated a series of qualifying principles. Websites offering a news service were categorized either as news media websites or as comprehensive (non-news) media websites. The latter may issue material from a news website, but may not publish news from its own news-gathering or from any other non-news media source (Ministry of Information Industry 2000). This provision continued guaranteeing the Party's control of news content, but made the traditional media lose their advantages as news transmission channels. The traditional media also underestimated the potential of online media, and regarded non-news websites as just another "landing place", to which they could export their own news products. Thus, they "fed the new-born online media all the content at an ultra-low price, which were crying piteously for milk" (Yu 2014, 6-11).

However, portal websites gave full play to the advantages of mass information gathering, hyperlinks, information classification and free browsing, which were totally beyond the traditional media's ability and imagination. In addition, greater emphasis was placed on user preferences (such as categorizing information based on user preferences) and user interaction (such as open article comments). This user-oriented logic has become increasingly prominent in the new network format, from forums to blogs, to micro-blogs, to WeChats and micro-videos (such as TikTok). The internet industry went on building platforms to produce content for users and also to allow users to generate content (UGC).

The internet has demoted the Party media's status from their once dominant role as news providers to ordinary information communicators. In the past, the Party media controlled the whole process of news production, from news-making to news distribution, but they can now only maintain the monopoly of official news-making through Chinese media regulations. As to the distribution of news and information, they have been overwhelmed by the internet.

The internet has intensified the competition between the media. On the internet technology platform, various forms of media can be merged in various ways. Newspapers, radio and television are all competing for the attention of the audience on the same internet platform. The internet has also intensified competition in content production. More and

more self-media are breaking the monopoly of traditional news content production, and are competing with formal media organizations. The Party media used to be regarded as the "platform for *all* news-gathering and aggregating", but now they are only the "platform for *authoritative* news-gathering and aggregating".

The internet has also changed the ways in which information is disseminated. Nowadays, the dissemination of news mainly depends on social networks and word-of-mouth communication, which means that the Party media dissemination channels are no longer as important as before. The internet has also changed the ways in which the effects of communication are assessed. In the past, the media could only measure the effects of communication indirectly, through surveys, circulation or audience ratings. In China, some of the methods for evaluating media effects are unreliable with regard to whether a news product has stimulated practical problem-solving, or whether it has attracted high-level attention. However, the internet has brought user-oriented, measurable assessment methods, such as page views, number of fans, compliments and comments, to the media product. It can even attract high-level attention through opinion leaders and the "Internet Navy" (*wangluoshuijun* 网络水军).

The vast amount of information provided by the internet has greatly occupied the public's attention and has reduced their demand for the Party media's official news. In addition, there is an imbalance in the supply of news among the Party media. The most numerous and most influential central-level Party media are gathered around central government, which focuses on national policy-making and concentrates on vocalization to promote and spread government policies. The Party media can also be used as tools by central government to urge local and grass-roots governmental bodies to implement their policies. But among the local and grass-roots governments, which focus on policy implementation, there is a lack of sufficient resources from the Party media. When citizens spontaneously set public agendas through the internet, it is the local governments which are easily challenged and affected.

Xi's claim that "the Party media's surname must be 'Party' (党媒姓党)" once again set the original tone for the Party media, but while they all actively follow his call, they continue with media transformation and integration development as well. On the one hand, the Party media identify with "the organs of the ruling party at all levels" and stand firmly at the forefront of political propaganda making. On the other hand, they make full use of their political and brand resources as Party media to

catch up with technological progress and the needs of users, in order to be active participants in media market competition. This dual identity leads to multiple tasks and modes of communication in the name of the Party media's mission.

3. THE PARTY MEDIA'S MODES OF INVOLVEMENT
   IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

In the West, most of the research on media and public policy is related to political elections. In general, the media play two main roles: first, the media are the means by which politicians pass on their campaign promises to voters (Strömberg 2004). Second, the media are the channels through which politicians can monitor the political environment (Deutsch 1963). If we regard the media merely as an intermediary, we may underestimate the power of media agenda-setting. American political scientists Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz particularly emphasize this point. They point out that one aspect of power is, of course, whether it can influence the decision-making process, but the other important aspect of power is whether it affects the setting of the agenda (Bachrach and Baratz 1962).

Owing to the tremendous energy of the media, Western scholars are profoundly introspective about the "mediatization phenomenon" (i.e., that the political institutions are increasingly being shaped by the media). Thomas Meyer calls this "media colonizing politics" and believes that the media's selection rules and presentation rules can control the logic of democracy (Meyer and Hinchman 2002, 49-72). Contrary to this, scholarly criticism of the Chinese media is mainly directed at the "politicization" and "non-democratic" nature of the media, i.e., that politics can easily influence and control the media. In this regard, in 2006, Chinese scholar Wang Shaoguang 王绍光 proposed a new perspective on how to judge whether a system is democratic (Wang 2006).

Wang Shaoguang also proposed that the key to judging whether a political system is "democracy" or not is to examine whether policymakers in the public policy agenda can respond to social concerns (Wang 2006). He divided the public policy agenda into three categories: the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda. Wang noted the importance of the media agenda, but since his core concern was the issue of "democracy" (i.e., whether the policy agenda could reflect the

public agenda), he did not examine in detail how the media affected the public agenda and the policy agenda. Instead, he focused on the relationship between the public agenda and the policy agenda. According to the identity of the agenda presenter and the degree of public participation, he classified six kinds of agenda-setting models, as shown in *Table 1*.

Table 1. – Modes of Chinese public policy agenda-setting.

		AGENDA PRESENTER		
		Decision maker	Brains trust	Civic society
Degree of public participation	Low	(1) Closed-door mode	(3) Internal reference mode	(5) Submission mode
	High	(2) Mobilization mode	(4) Borrowing mode	(6) External pressure mode

In the table, Wang does not discuss the media as a subject that influences the policy agenda, but as an intermediary between the policy agenda and the public agenda. He does not present the media role in the three modes of "low level of public participation" (i.e., closed-door mode, internal reference mode and submission mode), but only talks about the importance of the media agenda in the modes of "high level of public participation" (mobilization mode, borrowing mode and external pressure mode). From Wang's words, we can see that his knowledge of the Chinese media system, especially the role of the Chinese Party media, is far from adequate. Based on the interpretation of the Chinese Party media's dual identity in both internal and external communication, this paper proposes six of the Party media's typical communication modes for our observation and examination of contemporary Chinese media and political communication.

3.1. *Internal reference*

"Internal reference" (*neican* 内参) is a form of non-public media reporting with Chinese characteristics, which has been the main agent of the "eye-and-ear" function of the Party media for a long time. As early as 1931, when the Red China News Agency, the predecessor of the Xinhua News Agency, started publication, it was responsible for copying the news broadcast from the Kuomintang Central News Agency and other

radio stations. The collected news was compiled as a reference resource and was exclusively provided for the decision-making circle of the Soviet Central Bureau and the senior leadership of the Red Army.

Internal reference is different from public reporting. First, the focuses of reporting are different; internal reference is concerned with the more significant and sensitive issues. Second, the audience is different; internal reference belongs to state secret and quasi-state secret documents. Third, the two have different ways of generating social reaction; public reports promote problem-solving through public opinion, while internal reports solve problems through instructions from a high-ranking official (*lingdao pishi* 领导批示).

Xinhua News Agency was the first to carry out internal reference. There are two main internal materials within the CCP: "Reference News", following international news, and "Internal Reference", following domestic dynamics, and both are handled by the Xinhua News Agency. In 1953, in accordance with Mao Zedong's instructions on the Xinhua News Agency's internal reference system, all major regions, provinces and cities began to collect local news and publish their own internal reference materials. Since then, internal reference for news has been established as a system within the Party media. Today, media at all levels, as an extension of the Party and government, have internal reference mechanisms. Internal reference mainly consists of the following three types: (1) Xinhua News Agency's internal reference; (2) the central Party media's internal reference and the provincial Party media's internal reference; and (3) some central ministries, who also use internal reference to report recent situations (Yin 2012).

Take the Xinhua News Agency, for example. There is an interior division in the Xinhua News Agency called the Reference News Editing Department [2]. The writing for internal reference can be divided into two types: top-down and bottom-up. The top-down one is called "Mandatory Research" (*dianti diaoyan* 点题调研). The central political élites will usually make their concerns known by sending their written directive (*pishi* 批示) to the Xinhua News Agency. Members of the editorial meeting, chaired by the Chief Editor, will determine the focus and topic of research, set up a research team and send instructions to all branch agencies at home and abroad. Each branch agency will select topics according to their local conditions, and complete their research reports with important news. The

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[2] See the official introduction to the Reference News Editing Department of Xinhua News Agency: http://203.192.6.89/xhs/jgsz/2009-11/03/c_1378162.htm.

bottom-up type is conducted by local branches themselves. The Reference News Editing Department edits and selects important news gathered from the various branches. All the selected materials will be included in the periodical series of journals, such as *Domestic Dynamic Samples* (国内动态清样), *Reference Samples* (参考清样), and other internal reference publications, such as "Internal Reference" and "Selected Internal Reference".

In 2016, the Xinhua News Agency published more than 42,659 internal reference articles, covering 126 domestic-specific research topics, such as "economic hotspot tracking" and "innovation and new economic dynamics", and nearly 82 international-specific research topics, such as "American election series reports" and "world-leading technologies" (Xinhua News Agency 2017, 218).

Internal reference aims to illustrate a situation and its issues, pays more attention to timeliness, and has lower requirements on writing skills or rhetoric, which can make editing easier and more efficient. Thus, it stimulates the enthusiasm of reporters in writing internal reports.

The criteria for evaluating internal reference news is just "thinking what the central government wants, urging the central government's urgency". Obtaining the central élite's direct instructions means success. According to the statistics, in the first half of 2016, the Xinhua News Agency's internal reference received 1,497 instructions from the political centre, of which the most senior leader, General Secretary Xi Jinping, gave 40 instructions (Xinhua News Agency 2017, 219). It is precisely because of this incentive mechanism that the internal reference focuses on the attention of the central leadership and it might be difficult to comprehensively identify problems.

3.2. *Online public opinion monitoring*

With the development of the internet, more and more people can expose hidden truths and express their opinions through the internet, and some posts even cause mass protests and media coverage of events. At the beginning, however, restricted by policies, the traditional Party media could not fully play their roles.

In 2004, the "Decision of the Central Committee of the CCP on Strengthening the Construction of the Party's Governing Capacity", passed by the Fourth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee, put forward the requirement to strengthen the management of public sentiment, and thus prompted research on public sentiment.

After the responsive government theory was proposed, more and more government departments paid attention to responding through the internet. Since 2009, the Public Sentiment Monitoring Office of *People's Daily Online* has regularly published research findings, such as "Rankings of Local Government's Ability on Online Public Opinion Responsiveness" and "The Online Public Sentiment Index of Central Enterprises". It has also put forward a series of new ideas on responding to public sentiment, such as "four gold hours on handling emergencies", "cultivate in-system opinion leaders", "the internet's backward force mechanism on reform". It has also compiled reference books and provided long-term counselling on crisis public relations for government and business. These services bring additional economic benefits to the media. The *New Media Blue Book*, published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in July 2010 (Yin 2010), points out that the launch of the public opinion channel by *People's Daily Online* is remarkable. It shows that the Party Central Committee and the mainstream media attach great importance to the supervision of online media, exceeding traditional media supervision, and have also become the promoters and practitioners of China's democratic system in the New Media age.

3.3. *Media think tanks*

Media think tanks are the Party media's latest project. On 20 January 2015, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued "Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics", stressing that "a new type of think tank with Chinese characteristics is an important support for scientific and democratic decision-making. The decision-making consultation system is an important part of China's socialist democratic politics construction". It also states that it "supports the Party School of the Central Committee of CCP, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Chinese Academy of Engineering, the Development Research Centre of the State Council, the National School of Administration, the China Association for Science and Technology, the central news media, and some universities, research institutes [and] institutes of military systems, [which] should conduct pilot projects for high-end think tanks" (General Office of the Communist Party of China and General Office of the State Council 2015).

At the end of 2015, the Xinhua News Agency was approved as one of the first ten national high-end think tank pilots directly under the Party Central Committee, the State Council, and the Central Military Commission. Set up within the famous magazine *Outlook Weekly* (瞭望新闻周刊), the think tank was named Liaowang Institute (瞭望智库) and became a public policy research center. Marked by this, the Party media have embraced the media think tank era and formally participate in decision-making consultations.

When compared with media think tanks, news internal reference is still a form of news. It has strong time limits and authenticity, but only reflects objective conditions and does not recommend and conduct in-depth research on an issue. As for decision-making consultation, think tanks must undertake the entire task of presenting, analyzing and solving problems. In May 2016, fifteen Chinese media announced that they were establishing a think-tank, or an overall transition to a think tank, including four central Party media, two provincial Party media, four market-based media, and five portal sites (Wu, Xia, and Ma 2016).

The development of media think tanks took place against the background of media integration, and was the result of media transformation and media management. It has a strong market orientation, and its service targets include both government policy consulting and corporate consulting.

The methods of running media think tanks can be summarized by category. The first method is through the strategic co-operation of "media + think tanks", that is, media associated with traditional think tanks, such as universities and research institutes, sharing intellectual resources and media resources. For example, the *Zhejiang Daily* and the Zhejiang Provincial Institute of Public Policy established that sort of co-operation: the Zhejiang Provincial Institute of Public Policy regularly provides the *Zhejiang Daily* with expert resources, while the *Zhejiang Daily* publishes the Institute's research results and information on theme salons in a timely manner (Zhu, Wu, and Ma 2017, 40-43).

The second method is to conduct a special research programme with the "conference" at its core, that is, to take advantage of the media's conference and public relations, and to invite scholars, experts, and practitioners to discuss and publish the conference's important opinions.

The third is to establish the media's own research team and conduct research services with media advantages. The Xinhua News Agency's think tank is at the forefront of this project. Its Liaowang Research Report has already established a route to the General Office of the Central

Committee. It has also launched "Global Think Tank Tracking", "Macro Risk Observation", "Commodity Trend Observation" and "Commodity Special Report", etc. The General Office of the Central Committee also provides tasks and topics for think tanks, such as "Deepening Reforms", "Hong Kong Issues", "Xinjiang Issues", etc.

There are two main comparative advantages for the media's self-employed research team: one is that the media's reporter network has rapid access to information; the other is that reporters' unofficial identity and their abilities in communication and research can provide unique insights for their reports. The Party media have accumulated valuable experience on public sentiment, and today many of the Party media have established a public opinion analysis team, and regularly provide monitoring services for the higher authorities.

3.4. *Policy advocacy*

Policy advocacy is one of the most important tasks of the Chinese Party media. As Chairman Mao said in his well-known "Talk to the Editors of *Jinsui Daily*", "The role and power of the newspapers consists in their ability to bring the Party's programme and line, the Party's general and specific policies, its tasks and working methods before the masses in the quickest and most extensive way [...]. It is a leading art of Marxism-Leninism to be good at turning the Party's policies into the actions of the masses and to make every movement and struggle known not only by the cadres but also by the masses" (Xu 2004, 70). Mao made full use of his Party newspaper to lead the Great Leap Forward Movement, with catastrophic results.

Nowadays in China, the Party media still shoulder the task of policy advocacy, but, in fact, the function of mobilizing the masses to carry out political movements has been greatly reduced, which means that Chinese politics has gradually bid farewell to political movements and turned to governmental administration and legalization.

The policy propaganda of the Party media breaks through the top-down communication process within the bureaucratic system. While the central policy is conveyed and mobilized in the form of documents and meetings within the bureaucratic system, it is also issued to the entire nation through the Party media, and the corresponding propaganda and mobilization campaign is carried out through the co-operation of the media and the organization "Media Campaign". Through widely dis-

seminated publicity, the media try to create a positive opinion atmosphere, in order to attract the approval and participation of the masses. This kind of political communication is still very common in China, but the effect on social mobilization is not good. Many local organizations present the Party media's reports as their working achievements, but do not care about the effect of those reports, as there is little measurement of the audience's attention, understanding and approval.

3.5. *Media supervision*

In October 1987, the 13th National Congress of the Party for the first time put forward the concept of "public opinion supervision" (*yulun jiandu* 輿论监督), which in fact referred to media supervision under the leadership of the Party. Since then, this concept has been mentioned and interpreted in all Party Congress documents. It was also brought into "The Regulations on Inner-Party Supervision (Trial)", promulgated in 2004 (CPC Central Committee 2004).

Media supervision originates from the early critical media reports of the Party newspaper. It aimed to correct the shortcomings and mistakes of practical work through critical media reports, in order to realize the Party's principle of "seeking truth from facts". However, the tradition of Party media criticism was totally destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, but gradually recovered following the reform and opening-up policies.

The choice of media supervision instead of critical reports is not a minor semantic modification, but a symbol of conceptual progress. In the past, the so-called critical reports were mainly used by the Party as tools for guidance. If something went wrong with the guiding line, the media critical reports could still follow the wrong track and thus amplify the error with terrible results. During the Great Leap Forward Movement, such examples could be seen almost everywhere. Media supervision emphasizes that the people should be allowed to criticize the shortcomings and mistakes in the Party's work, and thus the Party returned the right to criticize to the public and the media, a kind of empowerment, though to a limited degree. The Party media used to be tools for political mobilization and ideological education for the people; now the function of the tools has been officially extended to public criticism.

Media supervision has expanded the media coverage of news reporting, media comments, public discussion and the criticism of various

social phenomena. During this process, the media agenda may be set by media people themselves, and may exert influence on the public agenda or even the policy agenda. Although such supervision has to "adhere to the principle of Party spirit" and must be carried out under the leadership of the Party, it is clearly different from the so-called "Fourth Estate" function of the Western media.

Since 1987, media coverage in the name of supervision has gradually increased and has become the top priority in the media's daily work. In 1994, CCTV launched a prime-time news programme called *Focus Interview* (焦点访谈), which was a very popular programme, because of its focus on practical problems and public concerns. When the audience ratings were at their highest, over 300 million people viewed it each evening. Many of the problems disclosed by the *Focus Interview* programme attracted the attention of the central and local government authorities, directly leading to the rapid solution of problems that had been overlooked for years. In 2002, the Office of the State Council set up a special feedback mechanism connected to *Focus Interview*, and 41 reports resulting from that were included in the State Council supervision mechanism (Sun 2003, 113). *Focus Interview* was once a milestone in media supervision in China, but it is now no longer in evidence.

Alongside the concept of media supervision, there has also been an emphasis on the principle of openness. Together with the step-by-step opening-up of government affairs, Party affairs and judicial affairs, and the establishment of the Government Information Disclosure, the news media have also extended their coverage to many more fields than before, in order to fulfil the people's right to know.

The Party media have greater advantages in influencing the public agenda and the policy agenda through investigative criticism, but their limitations are also obvious. Supervision of the Party media must be carried out under the leadership of the Party, and some significant critical reports on Party members and cadres therefore need to be approved by the Party Committees at the same level and with regard to the direction of public opinion. Media supervision is not an independent media right, since all the Party media are directly or indirectly affiliated to different levels of party and governmental organizations, and are thus enabled to interview, report and criticize at different administrative levels. Some scholars have identified two methods of media supervision in practice: one method is supervision by the upper-level media of the lower-level government, which is more or less the extension of administrative

powers; the other method is cross-regional supervision, which means that critics are dominated by non-local media. Challenged by the supervision of non-local media, the local media either selectively lose their voice or become the tools of the government media in a counter-attack.

3.6. *Guidance of public opinion*

As mentioned above, in policy advocacy, the media agenda is deeply affected or shaped by the policy agenda, and the Party media have privileged access to authentic information from the highest level, while bearing the responsibility for attracting the public's attention and setting the direction of the public agenda. In media supervision mode, based on professional journalistic capabilities, the Party media need to compete with other media for agenda-setting, and this may actively influence the public agenda and even the policy agenda, depending on the media agency.

   Along with the development of the internet, however, huge numbers of WeMedia keep on emerging, and citizen journalism is becoming the trend. More and more eye-catching news was first exposed by internet users through social media, and then inspired some network public opinion leaders, so that issues brewing online could finally set the public agenda. When online discussions become fierce, especially if they become a collective protest, this will inevitably attract the media's attention, or even set the media agenda. As an agent of mass communication, the Party media feel obliged to respond to the public agenda and strive to play a guiding role in bridging the gap between the public and the government. Thus, if the government is neutral to the focal event or just a referee, then the Party media usually intervene in time to guide the public agenda, prompting a solution of the issues. But if the critical spearhead is just directed at the government, then the Party media's agenda may not be able to reflect the public agenda, and may either go to aphasia or confront the public agenda. It thus depends on the Party media's awareness and its sensitivity to Chinese politics, especially to inner party struggles. Those who have courage, strategy and significant connections may finally win. Lu Xinning in the *People's Daily* set a good example. When most of the Party media hesitated to participate in online public debate, she elaborately planned a series of news comments in the *People's Daily*, which reflected both its "Party" surname and journalistic professionalism.

4. Conclusion and further theoretical introspection

"The press always takes on the form and colouration of the social and political structures within which it operates" (Siebert *et al.* 1956, 2). Every society has its own developing trajectory. The nature of the media cannot be deduced from the technical aspect only, but needs to "contextualize the media, especially the news media" (Hallin and Mancini 2004). From this point of view, this paper has described and analyzed the Party media's modes of political communication in the context of the political and socio-cultural changes in China since the reform and opening-up policies of 1978. However, the main purpose is not to explain "how the historical context of the development of China's journalism is obviously different from that of Western countries" (*ibid.*), but an attempt to join in the study of comparative media systems, seeking similarities, while "highlighting the diversity of media systems in the world" (*ibid.*).

In terms of methodology, this article follows the paradigm of structural functionalism. Merton (2006) once praised functionalism as a super method; and J.C. Alexander, who advocates new functionalism, also believes that "functionalism does not mean a set of concepts, a sort of method, a kind of theoretical model, or an ideology; instead, it is a tradition" (Alexander 1985, 1-2). This paper hopes to inherit the theoretical tradition of functionalism concerning the relationship between totality and locality, function and structure, and to agree with Durkheim's view that social change is a process of social differentiation. Unlike Parsonianism, it avoids the perspective of maintaining the "balance" of the social system, thus turning the study of structure and function into the study of social control.

From the description of the Chinese Party media's participation in political communication, this paper will turn to functional analysis. The so-called "functional analysis" is what Merton explicitly states about "how one [of the social or cultural aspects] works in society" (Merton 2006). The definition of function comes from Radcliffe Brown, an anthropologist highly regarded by Merton. Starting from Durkheim's interpretation of the function of social customs, he defines function as "the consistency between custom and the necessary conditions for the social organism's survival" (Alexander 1985). In the author's opinion, the fact is that the Party media's participation in political communication is a kind of political "custom". In Chairman Mao's era, the function of the Party media in organizational communication was unilaterally played to the extreme, and finally ran counter to media characteristics.

By comparison, at present, the Party media are clear about their dual identities and constantly strive to exert their media function in different ways, adapting to contemporary Chinese social and political structures. In the process of adapting, the Chinese Party media have also produced some structural characteristics of their own. Owing to limited space, a detailed discussion on the structural changes to the Party media cannot be undertaken here. In order to evaluate the impact of the Party media's structural changes on the Chinese media system, an examination of the political and social structures may lead to further relevant questions for future research. In general, it is of great academic importance to study the Chinese Party media's involvement in political communication.

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