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Journalism culture in Kunming: market competition, political constraint, and new technology in a Chinese metropolis

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JOURNALISM CULTURE IN KUNMING: MARKET COMPETITION, POLITICAL CONSTRAINT AND NEW TECHNOLOGY IN A CHINESE METROPOLIS

by

Zhaoxi Liu

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree in Mass Communications
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

December 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Judy Polumbaum

ABSTRACT

This study explores the occupational culture of journalism in a Southwestern China metropolis, Kunming, answering the questions of what and how journalists there give meaning to their work through analyzing the substance and form of the journalism culture. Over three months of fieldwork in four different local newspapers revealed a gap between the meanings these journalists aspire and the meanings they can materialize through practice, due to political and economic constraints. As a result, the journalists felt conflicted and deeply frustrated but at the same time tried to push the boundaries in different ways, including active use of digital technology and social media. The study also found that the journalism culture was intrinsically intertwined with the social, cultural and global environment within which it resided, as social conflict, widespread mistrust and global influences played important roles in shaping the meanings the journalists gave to their work. The journalism culture was also one of contradictions and uncertainties, still in the making and changing at a rapid pace. It is a journalism culture of a particular transitional era and place, with Chinese characteristics.

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Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Zhaoxi Liu

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy
degree in Mass Communications at the December 2012 graduation.

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Dan Berkowitz

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Frank Durham

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Tim Havens

_____
Wenfang Tang

To my family

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the occupational culture of journalism in a Southwestern China metropolis, Kunming, answering the questions of what and how journalists there give meaning to their work through analyzing the substance and form of the journalism culture. Over three months of fieldwork in four different local newspapers revealed a gap between the meanings these journalists aspire and the meanings they can materialize through practice, due to political and economic constraints. As a result, the journalists felt conflicted and deeply frustrated but at the same time tried to push the boundaries in different ways, including active use of digital technology and social media. The study also found that the journalism culture was intrinsically intertwined with the social, cultural and global environment within which it resided, as social conflict, widespread mistrust and global influences played important roles in shaping the meanings the journalists gave to their work. The journalism culture was also one of contradictions and uncertainties, still in the making and changing at a rapid pace. It is a journalism culture of a particular transitional era and place, with Chinese characteristics.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO "HEAVEN AND HELL"

Xiao Zhou[1] is well known among journalists in Kunming as a daring investigative reporter. Other journalists speak of him as legendary and invincible.

He describes himself, however, as a hedgehog that turned into a mouse after running through the woods, having lost all his sharp needles in battle.

Born in the 1960s, Xiao has worked in Kunming newspapers for 10 years. He says his ideal is to make journalism do more and serve more people, and he professes to love doing investigative reporting. "Revealing a judge sleeping with underage prostitutes is to make the judiciary and law enforcement fairer. Revealing drawbacks of the political system is in hopes of making the execution of political power cleaner and fairer," he says.

Xiao wants to be "a swordsman" who acts "on behalf of the people," and the stories he and others tell illustrate how boldly he has gone about this mission. Once, he recalls, he had an argument with a propaganda official at the provincial police bureau over a story and the official pointed a gun to his head and threatened to shoot him dead. "I said you go ahead and shoot. If you don't shoot me, I have recorded today's conversation and I will later post it on the Internet. I then returned to the newsroom and saw that police cars already had arrived. Police officers were telling people in the newsroom not to let me touch any computers." Was he afraid, I asked? "Of what?" he responded. "[The official was] just trying to scare me" (October 15, 2011)[2].

Like many journalists I met in the course of this study, Xiao has seen his aspirations come up against hard realities over the years. One night a few years ago, for

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[1]This is a pseudo name.

[2]Dates in the parenthesis indicate the date of entry in my fieldnotes. Since all fieldnotes were written in 2011, only month and date will be shown hereafter.

example, a tipster calling on a news hotline reported that a real estate company had just leveled the ground by Dianchi Lake and buried alive two children sleeping in a tent next to the lake. Xiao and a photographer went to cover the story. Afterwards, late at night, their editor invited them to drink tea, reminded them that, “We are a market paper,” and told them the real estate company had paid 1.3 million yuan of advertisement fee in exchange for the newspaper’s silence. The story never ran.

Xiao’s colleagues said he gets paid up to 8,000 yuan of compensation per piece for those that are published, higher than the average monthly income of most of his colleagues, who usually makes around 3,000 yuan per month on average. Of course, one 8,000-yuan story, if there is one, usually is all that Xiao got for a whole month since such stories are long, investigative pieces that take time to finish. But far more important to him than the money, he says, is “solving people’s problems,” an aim most of his stories fall short on as far as he is concerned.

Xiao once got tips from villagers in his hometown, a rural county west of Kunming, revealing government supported massive illegal tree felling. He went to investigate the incident and was invited to meet with one of the top local officials. The official begged him to “control the direction of the story” for the sake of his hometown. Xiao ignored the official’s plead and the story was published. To his surprise, right before higher authorities were about to punish the local government, main officials related to the misconduct were transferred to other offices, which effectively allowed these officials to escape punishment.

Another time, Xiao went undercover at a railroad construction site, posing as a migrant worker to investigate contractors who were embezzling by using lower quality concrete. The resulting story triggered an investigation, and railway authorities ordered some of the construction work to be redone and fined the contractor, but denied use of low quality concrete and stopped short of investigating the chain of interest that might

have linked back to the authorities themselves. Xiao and his editor at the time were furious. “Seeing that the fire is about to burn higher, [they] covered it up,” Xiao says.

After all these years and all these stories, he concludes, investigative pieces that expose high-level abuse “are all loud thunder with small rain drops.” Each story’s publication initially gives him hope, he says. “But eventually, the stories are harmonized and harmonized [a reference to a common official slogan, *hexie*, meaning “build a harmonious society”], rendered useless” (October 14).

Early in 2011, the editor who had pushed for investigative reporting and strongly supported Xiao and his coverage left journalism all together to start his own business doing express delivery. Xiao said his best boss ever changed careers out of “despair” (October 14). This editor’s successor, a much younger journalist, described is predecessor as “relentless and idealistic about journalism,” and concurred that, “He left because he was disappointed about the environment surrounding journalism” (October 18, II) [Roman numerals at the end of the date indicate the part of the fieldnote for the same date].

Under the new leadership, the newspaper increasingly shied away from hard-core investigative coverage. “If you always do stories revealing darkness, the newspaper will have a more difficult time,” says one of Xiao’s former colleagues at the newspaper. “I tried to persuade Xiao: Don’t be so relentless any more. You can’t change it. You will hit a dead end if you are too persistent” (October 25).

Xiao indeed sounds almost ready to surrender. “I have always tried to carry on and would rather die than give up,” he says. But he has been tired of suppression and obstruction for economic and political reasons. “I feel like an idiot. There are so many [bad] people out there. As soon as you beat down one devil, another and then another appear.” So he, too, is considering a career change, maybe starting his own business. “Go out there to make some money for retirement. Discard ideals completely,” he says (October 14).

Many other journalists in this study express similar ideals about correcting the wrongs of the society and system, making people's lives better. Some speak of upholding social justice and pushing for political change. But like Xiao, these idealistic journalists express deep frustration at the obstructions to their work ranging from threats to banned stories to coverage producing little or no impact. In short, these Chinese journalists face a huge gap between what they aspire to do and what they can actually accomplish.

The journalists say Kunming is both heaven and hell for their occupation. They are never short of stories: car accidents, house fires, mysterious bodies, government scandals, food safety violations, and common people walking into the newsroom with tales of suffering and injustice. At their busiest, journalists have no time for meals or even going to the bathroom. At the same time, they feel limited in the sorts of stories they can write. Covering a car crash or suicidal roof jumper is merely doing the daily job, but does not mean much to them. Most aspire is to be muckrakers, to stop social injustice, to make a difference. Over and over, they come up against political and economic restraints.

Nevertheless, some find tangible ways to give meaning to their work through helping individuals without money or power. People wronged by authorities, mistreated by public institutions, or simply too poor to take care of themselves may walk into newsrooms to find a sympathetic ear; not uncommonly, an aggrieved person will kneel down to beg for help. Journalists often do try to help such individuals through writing stories about them and the stories often times result in donations from the public or attention from the authorities—even if it will not have much impact on the broader system. They see this as making small changes when a big change is not feasible.

Journalists also are turning to a new channel to amplify their efforts and get out stories that might otherwise be stymied: weibo, or micro blogging, China's equivalent of Twitter. On this new platform, journalists can express opinions or cover stories that would never make their newspapers. Weibo therefore constitutes a sort of therapy for journalists troubled by the gap between ideals and realities, and Weibo also may have

more consequential results. For many journalists, the virtual world is more attuned to reality than the real world.

This project, taking a cultural perspective that focuses on interpretation of meaning, attempts to convey what it is really like to be a Chinese journalist in a highly competitive market environment, within a controlled media system, yet also with the alternative tools supplied by digital technologies. My main objective is to explore how journalists give meaning to their work and to understand how such meaning is shaped by the political, economic, cultural and technological circumstances. Specifically, I look into the journalism culture of local tabloids in a southwestern China metropolis. As such, this study focuses on the particular rather than the general, with the hope of arriving at a nuanced picture of the occupational culture of news workers in a system operating under both a free market and authoritarianism, during a rapidly changing digital age.

The dissertation is organized as follows:

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the Chinese journalism landscape at national and local levels.

Chapter 3 lays out the theoretical perspective of this study, explaining a framework for cultural inquiry into journalism and the study of journalism as an occupational culture.

Chapter 4 discusses methodological approach, study design and specific methods, as well as practical and ethical issues encountered in the research.

Chapter 5 draws a sketch of the daily life and work of journalists in newsrooms in Kunming's metro papers, as a prelude to more detailed analysis of their occupational culture.

Chapter 6 presents findings related to the construction of the journalism culture under investigation, including journalists' job definitions, collective identity, and shared values, ideals and beliefs through which they assign meaning to their work.

Chapter 7 presents findings related to manifestations of journalism culture, or the practices that materialize meanings discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 8 addresses constraints on material practices of meaning, discussing the various kinds of restraints journalists encounter, and their reactions.

Chapter 9 examines how larger trends in the social environment, particularly the influences of mounting social conflicts, widespread mistrust and foreign ideas, intertwine with journalists' work.

Chapter 10 takes a closer look at how emerging communication technologies--the Internet, smart phones, social media, multimedia coverage, and so on--are changing the way journalism is done and in some cases expanding spheres of news coverage.

Chapter 11 relates this local journalism culture to broader national and global contexts, considered in light of previous studies on Chinese journalism, to draw some conclusions about Chinese characteristics of journalism culture. This concluding chapter also offers final thoughts about the study and directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2 BACKGROUND

This chapter outlines key changes of Chinese journalism and media in the post-Cultural Revolution era, providing relevant context for the current study, followed by a closer look at the local news media landscape in Kunming, site of the study.

Reforms and Transformation

The history of modern Chinese journalism emerged with patriotic journalists like Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei toward the end of the 19th century, when the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), China's last imperial regime, was about to collapse and people were questioning the fate of China (Burgh, 2003; Li, 2007). Journalism in the late Qing Dynasty operated in part as a discursive tool used by intellectuals calling for action to save the nation from enslavement by Western industrial powers and agitating for social and political revolution.

Later journalists such as Shao Piaoping, Hu Zhengzhi and Zhang Jiluan continued such tradition of intellectual press into the early 20th century during the Republic of China era, operating on the ground of independence from the state, informing the public and seeking truth (Burgh, 2003; Hsiao & Yang, 1990; Li, 2007). The independent and public-serving spirit of journalism at that time was well expressed in the "Four Nos" principle set by Mr. Zhang Jiluan, editor in chief of Dagong Bao (Ta Kung Pao) in the 1920s: no party affiliation (不党), no exchanging coverage for money or accepting financial support from political interests (不卖), no using the newspaper for personal gains but devoting to public service (不私), and no blindly following other people's opinions or obscuring facts (不盲) (Cai, 2010).

By contrast, the press system established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) first in the base areas during wartime and then as the party in power after 1949, was highly organized and became an integral part of the state (Li, 2007). During the early years of the PRC, media were organized into a Leninist press system, characterized by

central control, with no private ownership of media allowed and Party propaganda authorities supervising content. Although it is an oversimplification to claim the Party control of media as absolute and monolithic, because diversity did exist, it is fair to say that major media outlets such as national newspapers were for the most part the Party's mouthpiece (Chu, 1979; Liu, 1971; Schurman, 1968; Sun, 1994; White, 1979; Yu, 1979; Zhao, 1998).

Such a press system had explicit purposes: to change people's mindset, promote a new set of communist and socialist values while eradicating old, traditional, Confucianism-based ones, and cultivate new behavioral patterns (Barnett, 1979). Such purposes stemmed in part from Mao Zedong's emphasis on the power of ideology, his belief that correct ideas and thinking would lead to desirable action (Chu, 1979; Liu, 1971; Schurman, 1968; Yu, 1979). The state-run press system--chiefly newspapers and radio in the early years--also met the country's practical needs to unify a nation shattered by decades of wars and chaos and to build a new society based upon common ideas and shared identity, that is, a new, socialist China (Liu, 1971).

During the decade of Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the press functioning as a political tool was taken to its extreme. The media were mostly in the hands of the leftists like the Gang of Four and served their political interests (Bishop 1989). Newspapers were filled with political slogans, didactic editorials, quotes from communist icons such as Marx, Lennin and Mao Zedong, and other politics laden content. Exaggeration and fabrication were also prevalent in news media. The Cultural Revolution is deemed the dark age of Chinese journalism (Zhao, 1998).

Following the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao, China entered a period of opening up and reform that began to transform many institutions, including the news media. In November 1978, at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Party, Deng Xiaoping announced that from then on the priority of the Party and the entire country would be shifted to economic development, rather than the "class struggle"

promoted during the Cultural Revolution, and that China would actively engage with the outside world. The meeting also called for "emancipation of thought" from the rigid leftist doctrines of Mao's era. Deng maintained that that "practice is the only criterion for testing truth," and the country embarked on a program of economical, political and cultural liberalization (Hutchings, 2001). Encouraged by these new policies, liberal-minded Chinese journalists joined efforts to turn the propaganda machine into an information disseminator with more autonomy and diversity, and a focus on the needs of the common people rather than the dictates of the Party; and some advocated for legal protections under a proposed national journalism law (Goldman, 1994; Hu, 2006; Hsiao & Yang, 1990; Li, 1994; Polumbaum, 1990; Sun, 1994; Womack, 1987).

Throughout the 1980s, momentum for political reform and liberalization continued to build, climaxing in the spring of 1989, when millions of people took to the streets in Beijing and other cities across China. The movement ended with the bloody Tiananmen Square crackdown of June 4th (Harding, 1987; Hutchings, 2001; Miles, 1996), and for another few years the press was reigned in. Deng Xiaoping's famed "southern tour" in 1992, during which he called for bolder moves in economic reform and renewed opening to the outside world, signaled a resurgence of experimentation (Miles, 1996). Shortly after the tour, the CCP officially embraced the market economy. Political liberalization had been set aside for the time being, but economic liberalization spread through the press system as well, with the state playing an important role in promoting media commercialization. At the same time, the drive to turn media institutions from state agencies into businesses meant some degree of decentralization and loosened state controls (He, 2000; Lynch, 1999; Pan, 2000; Wu, 2000; Zhao, 1998). In the process, audience interests grew increasingly important and, news coverage of economy, commerce, arts and entertainment flourished, but discussion of political issues remained closely monitored (Zhao, 1998). At the same time, the state turned to more subtle and sophisticated measures to maintain media control, acquiring greater facility with public

relations techniques in spinning and framing news discourses (Brady, 2008; Liu, 2009; Polumbaum, 1994; Zhao, 2008). The result was an odd hybrid system rife with contradictions and ambiguities emerging from the tension between an authoritarian political structure and a liberal market economy (Lee, 1994, 2000; Zhao, 2008).

The Backdrop of Modernization and Globalization

The transformation of Chinese media and journalism of course is part of the overall process of China's transition from a traditional society to a modern one (Liu, 2004; King, 1967). In addition, China has become highly integrated with the world and subject not only to the forces of the global marketplace, but also to flows of global culture. A brief discussion of what modernization and globalization have meant for China is warranted here to help set the scene for a study of the changing culture of journalism.

Giddens says the term "modernity" refers to "modes of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence" (1990, p. 1). By and large, scholars of modern society have emphasized change, uncertainty, economic expansion, obsession with growth, and unsaturated human desire (Berman, 1982; Castrodias, 1987; Giddens, 1990; Tomlinson, 1991). In contrast, traditional China, usually seen as existing in the 2000 years from Qin dynasty (221 B.C.) to the end of Qing dynasty (1911), is characterized in terms of a static, self-contained, family-centered agricultural economy, imperial authoritarian rule by emperors, and a value system that respects the old and the ancient, worships ancestors, focuses on family and filial piety, values the stability and peaceful life style associated with agricultural production, and rejects the competition and instability associated with commerce and market economy (King, 1967). Both characterizations are, of course, simplifications, but the point is that "modern" and "traditional" ways of life are generally viewed as incompatible.

The 1840 Opium War, during which the British navy bombed Chinese ports, marked the start of the collapse of traditional China (King, 1967) and the start of the struggle for modernization in the century to come. After the founding of the People's Republic, China's modernization progressed robustly in terms of industrial development, especially during the years prior to the Cultural Revolution. In the early 1960s, Premier Zhou Enlai set out the goal of the "four modernizations" in industry, agriculture, national defense, and science and technology (Hutchings, 2001); and Deng's reforms brought China into tight interaction with the capitalist world-system in the economic and technological sectors. Meanwhile, in political, social and cultural spheres, China remained resistant to Western norms and values (Liu, 2004).

This dilemma was evident in China's negotiations to join the WTO in 2001, in which China endeavored to shield news media and domestic television from Western influence as long as possible, and managed to postpone the deadline for allowing foreign capital into media production until 2004 (Huang, 2007). For the Chinese authorities, these areas are crucial to "thought work" aimed at maintaining ideological control (Brady, 2008; Lee, 2003). Nonetheless, the country has been unable to keep the forces of globalization at bay, and their influences on Chinese media already are evident, from technologies to imported content to business models (McCormick & Liu, 2003). China's push for media commercialization, although part and parcel of domestic reform trends, emerged partly because of pressure from global commercial media, mainly based in the West. The Chinese government pushed for media mergers in the early 2000s, with big party organs absorbing smaller papers to form "Western-style" media conglomerates, largely out of fear that without such domestic media giants, media would be vulnerable to foreign control once China reached its WTO deadline for allowing foreign investment into this domain (Lee, 2000; Zhao, 2008).

With the penetration and indeed welcoming of foreign products and ideas, Chinese people have become familiar with Western cultural goods, from the NBA and

NASCAR to Hollywood movies; and Chinese journalists are no strangers to Western journalism ideas (Polumbaum, 2008). In their discourse on their identity as journalists, for example, some Chinese journalists define themselves as U.S.-style professionals, devoted to objectivity and accuracy, and talking about Walter Cronkite or *60 Minutes* as role models (Pan & Lu, 2003). In short, China's prolonged and still ongoing modernization processes and the newer trends of globalization are fundamental elements of the context within which journalism in China operates.

Press Commercialization and Metro Papers

Among the recent sweeping changes in China's journalism and media, an especially noteworthy development is the rise of so-called "metro papers," which will be examined more closely in this section.

The metro paper phenomenon was a direct consequence of nationwide media reforms in the 1990s, whose main goal was to sever government subsidies to all but a few key Party media organs and thus compel most traditionally government-supported media to become self-supporting. Following the decisive embrace of market economy at the 12th Party Congress in 1992, many newspapers that for decades had survived on public funds found government subscriptions slashed. A massive movement to market-based financing, with circulation-building and advertising becoming critical, ensued (He, 2000, 2003; Lee, 1994, 2000, 2003; Liu, 2000; Sun, 2002; Zhao, 1998). For some small newspapers, this meant the end, but for others, it offered potential for big sales and new life, in the marketplace. Major newspaper publishers, mostly those putting out Party organs, scrambled to create new products that would grow their audiences. These state-run news institutions, still receiving some funding from the government to maintain their Party functions but also encouraged to explore other revenue sources, came up with a new breed of popular newspaper that became known as the metro paper (Liu, 2000; Huang & Zhou, 2003; Sun, 2002; Zhao, 1998).

In 1999, a meeting of executives from 40-plus metro papers around the country agreed upon the following definition of this format: daily newspapers based in a city, market oriented, relevant to readers, and with a strong urban grassroots flavor. In other words, metro papers were "city residents' papers" (Sun, 2002, p. 179). By the early 2000s, there were about 500 of them around China (Sun, 2002). The earliest metro papers were created as market-oriented offspring of Party organs. This is the case for *Southern Metropolis Daily*, an offspring of *Southern Daily*, the provincial party organ of Guangdong, *Spring City Evening News*, offspring of Yunnan provincial party organ *Yunnan Daily*, and *Western China Metropolis Daily*, offspring of Sichuan provincial party organ *Sichuan Daily*, among many others. This is because at the time, Party organs had the financial and human resources to create new publications, and perhaps more importantly, the credentials to obtain licenses for new publications (Liu, 2000; Sun, 2002). Later on, private capital entered into funding some metro papers, such as *New Life Daily* in Kunming. Meanwhile, some government agencies' publications transformed into metro papers, such as *Chengdu Business News* (Huang & Zhou, 2003).

These metro papers may be categorized as "semi-official" commercialized newspapers, and in some cases as "non-official" fully commercial newspapers (Stockmann, 2010). Official papers continue to publish as explicit mouthpieces of Party apparatus and government agencies, financed by a mix of some type of state subsidies and advertising. Fully commercialized are financed solely through advertising, retail and investment, and run as profit-seeking enterprises. In between are semi-official papers, still affiliated with party or government organs but oriented toward and sustained by the market. Commercial and semi-official papers are less controlled by the state and have more variety and flexibility than official papers.

Metro dailies arose in the major regional metropolises, usually provincial capitals, populous cities that function as economic, cultural and political centers. As such, these cities are the key market for selling advertisements (Liu, 2000), with circulation fueled by

attention to local news—metro papers are generally local papers (Huang & Zhou, 2003; Sun, 2002). And in contrast with the common parent papers—municipal or provincial organs printed on broadsheets—metro papers are almost invariably in tabloid format and employ much livelier language, headlines, layout and graphics. Unlike official papers, which emphasize official news and maintain a serious tone, metro papers traffic in stories of common people as well as celebrities, entertainment and sensationalism. Some metro papers also are bold about criticizing those in power (Liu. 2000; Sun, 2002; Wang, 2008). These traits have made metro papers an enormous success in many cases, read by millions every day on the bus and subway, at work, or at home, influential enough to gain a strong hold in mainstream discourse (Huang & Zhou, 2003).

Last but not least, metro papers compete fiercely with each other. One-paper towns are nearly non-existent in China, especially in provincial capital cities. In Guangzhou, at least three local daily papers are competing for circulation and advertising: *Guangzhou Daily*, *Goat City Evening News* and *Southern Metropolitan Daily*. In Chengdu, capital city of Sichuan, there was a time when five metro papers were vying for preeminence—four still exist. In Nanjing, capital city of Jiangsu, at least three metro papers are major players. And in Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan and research site of the current study, there used to be at least six metro papers and four remain, fighting for market share in a city of six million people (Liu, 2000; Huang & Zhou, 2003; Sun, 2002).

Metro papers operating in the same city, targeting similar readership and competing for the same stories and advertisers not surprisingly often turn out quite similar in appearance and content. Their competitive battles entail reducing prices, adding pages, increasing color and rewarding subscribers—to name just a few tactics (Huang & Zhou, 2003; Sun, 2002). Sometimes competing papers find themselves in such a fix that they finally declare a truce. The three major metro dailies in Nanjing, for example, once rallied to set a limit for the price of their papers, not because it had gone

too high, but too low (Huang & Zhou, 2003). Some metro papers look for growth opportunities elsewhere, usually in less developed or less mature media markets (Huang & Zhou, 2003). *Cheng Du Business News* entered the Kunming market for a period, and the Guangzhou-based Nanfang Media Group is co-publisher of one Kunming metro paper.

New Players: the Internet and Weibo

Another important dimension of context for the current study is the cyber environment within which journalists are practicing their craft on a daily basis. The Internet in China has some distinctive characteristics within the system of media controls that are worth elaboration here.

China officially connected with the global Internet in 1994 (Peng, 2005*).* In 1997, there were fewer than one million web users in China (Law & Chu, 2008). By the end of 2011, the number surpassed 500 million, with a penetration rate of more than 38%; and about 356 million Chinese people used a mobile device to access the Internet, according to the annual report by China Internet Information Center (CNNIC, 2012).

As some scholars of Chinese new media have noted, the Internet is neither liberating nor revolutionary in itself (Shie, 2004). From the outset, the Chinese government was wary of digital technologies that might present new avenues to challenge state control but recognized that Internet development was essential to China's economic growth and global integration (Endeshaw, 2004). The Party thus has endeavored to use the benefits of the Internet to strengthen its power, while using controlling measures to keep political risks to a minimum (Tai, 2006; Zheng, 2007; Zhou, 2005). At the same time, in what Tai (2006) calls a "fragmented authoritarian" state, different camps have different agendas in dealing with the development of digital technologies. Zheng (2007) identifies the two major camps as a "control regime" and a "regulatory regime." The control regime, represented by the Central Propaganda Department and State Council

Information Office, is mainly concerned about squelching political discourse on the Internet, and therefore issued or supported numerous regulations limiting political discussion online, applied blocking and filtering technologies, deployed cyber-cop monitors and, when challenged, police powers, including arrests of dissidents (Endeshaw, 2004; Lacharite, 2002; Shie, 2004; Tai, 2006; Zheng, 2007). Newer measures require self-censorship on the part of web content/service providers and users (Endeshaw, 2004; Shie, 2004). On the other hand, the regulatory regime, in the form of the Ministry of Information Industry (MII) and CNNIC, is interested in facilitating the development of the Internet while managing its growth and profitability. In light of this structure, agencies with different purposes and agendas sometimes have conflicting interests, which can lead to inefficiencies in enforcing hard and soft forms of control (Lacharite, 2002; Tai, 2006; Zheng, 2007).

Along with state interests and involvement, the growth of China's civil society is another key element in the use and expansion of the Internet, which in turn also fosters the growth of China's civil society. Civil society refers to the totality of non-state controlled, grass-root, voluntary-member based organizations, institutions and activities that function in the public domain. In a general sense, civil society could be anywhere in the society that allow non-state controlled organizations and activities, which could exist in non-democratic society (Wnuk-Lipinske, 2007). Scholars diverge on the existence of a viable civil society in China; some say China's civil society is state-led (Wnuk-Lipinske, 2007), or that China does not really have a civil society, only elements of it (Zhou, 2005), or that China has a "third realm," a social space in which both the state and citizens contribute in order to maintain order and provide public services (Huang, 1993). Nonetheless, activities and expression outside the ambit of state control have undisputably increased over the past two decades, and the Internet provides a new platform and new opportunities for this trend. This is significant for a country in which state organizations once penetrated nearly all aspects of social life, leaving little room for

non-state organized social activities (Schurman, 1968). A strong state may have been essential in re-establishing order in China in the early years of the PRC, but as China continues to develop a free market economy and integrate into the global system, the authorities themselves have come to realize that omnipresent state control may impede development. In addition, the very character of new digital technologies makes monolithic control pragmatically impossible.

For China to become a modern society and people to enjoy more rights, a robust civil society is crucial, and the Internet plays an important role in this development. Not surprisingly, some Chinese citizens, especially those educated and with the access to the web, have used the Internet to express opinions different from dominant official ideology. College students and intellectuals were among the earliest Internet users, and many used online means to share political opinions that could not be published in traditional media (Zhou, 2005). But as access has expanded, the Internet has evolved from a fairly elite channel into more of a grassroots forum. This is not automatically a "democratic" advance, as one particularly Chinese Internet phenomenon shows: in a common netizen vigilante justice arrangement known as the "human flesh search engine," Internet users band together to pursue and harass those they see as wrongdoers, from kittens killers to corrupt government officials, sometimes even to the point of violating individual's privacy and rights (Downey, 2010).

The news media also have a strong presence online (Tai, 2006). Nearly every media outlet in China, newspapers and broadcast stations included, national and local media alike, now has a website (Peng, 2005); and news has become a major component of commercial web portals such as sina.com and sohu.com, although such commercial websites are not allowed to cover political news by themselves and may only republish content from state-sanctioned news organizations (Lagerkvist, 2006; Peng, 2005).

The Internet has certainly contributed to breaking through the state monopoly on information, with more diverse opinions than ever available online, leading some

observers to speak of an online public sphere in China. The Internet also provides tools for common people to monitor government officials and expose wrongdoing, and to form group and organize collective actions, such as web-motivated anti-Japanese protests in 2005 (Tai, 2006; Yang, 2003). Government monitoring and control are juxtaposed with the seemingly open and transparent nature of the Internet, and government filtering still puts limits on the supposedly unlimited information potential of the Internet. Nevertheless, new media have provided the Chinese people, journalists included, with new ways to imagine and to some extent practice democracy.

The growth of Internet information and discussion, particularly on political issues, gained further momentum with the introduction of weibo, or microblogging, services. Adopting Twitter's standard, each post on weibo cannot exceed 140 Chinese characters, which actually accounts for considerably more content than the same number of English alphabet letters—140 Chinese characters is equivalent to roughly 70 words. Chinese microblog sites first emerged in 2007 on a relatively small scale. What turned weibo into a national sensation was the launch of Sina Weibo in 2009, a service provided by China's most influential web service and content provider, sina.com.cn (Yu et al., 2011). Within two years, Sina Weibo gained 300 million registered users. By 2011, there were on average 100 million posts on Sina Weibo each day (Zhou, 2012). Research has shown that 78% percent of Sina Weibo users are under 30 years old, and 66% percent are college educated. Journalists fit well with this profile. Moreover, more than 25% of Sina Weibo posts are about news and social issues (Yu et al., 2011). As with Twitter, the system allows common folks to obtain and share news and information among themselves rather than going through gatekeepers of traditional media. Weibo is no longer few-to-many, but everybody-to-everybody communication, and this service is playing an increasingly important role in the development of China's civil society.

Not surprisingly, weibo is becoming an indispensible part of Chinese journalists' daily work. This is evident from weibo's involvement in spreading information about

public events over the past several years. In September 2010, for example, a family in Jiangxi set themselves on fire to protest government-ordered demolition of their home. When two sisters of the family tried to go to Beijing to plead their case to higher authorities, local government officials sent people to capture them at the airport. The sisters eventually had to hide in a restroom to avoid being captured and called a reporter for help. The reporter posted the situation on weibo, and the post was re-tweeted more than 2700 times in one morning. Consequently, the incident was followed by many media as well as the public, who voiced strong support for the victims and eventually prompted the government at a higher level to investigate the case and punish responsible local officials. Also in 2010, when a massive landslide occurred in Gansu, rescuers at the scene posted video and messages about the disaster on weibo, provided real-time update to a national audience and attracted volunteers to the relief work (Lee, 2011; Yu et al., 2011).

Kunming's Newspaper Industry

The current study was conducted in Kunming, my hometown in southwestern China, about 2000 miles southwest of Beijing. It is the capital city of Yunnan Province, a multi-ethnic province bordering Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, and very close to Thailand and Cambodia, which are all members of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Kunming has become China's land gateway to ASEAN member nations, and is forging strong economic and cultural ties with these countries. The city is also a major tourism destination that attracts visitors from all around the world. At the end of 2010, there were 6.4 million residents in the city (Kunming Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

Yunnan is the province in China with the most variety of minority ethnic groups: 25 such groups out of the total 55 formally recognized are represented in Yunnan. Historically, Yunnan has always been regarded as a borderland occupied by non-Han, and therefore outside the mainstream Han culture. The very name of Kunming was originally that of an ethnic group residing in the eastern part of the region before it came

to refer to the place. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Kunming became the most advanced town in Yunnan. It also was a main draw for Han population moving from other parts of China. Since the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), various imperial courts, regional warlords, and others that ruled Yunnan mostly set Kunming as the capital. After Yunnan became a province of the People's Republic of China in 1950, Kunming became its capital city (Ma, 1991). Still, Yunnan is up to this date considered a remote, boarder province and somewhat exotic place comparing with eastern China regions, where the core of traditional Chinese culture was nurtured. It is also perceived as among the less developed provinces, in terms of economy, society and culture. Nonetheless, Kunming has one of the most dynamic newspaper industries in the country.

Yunnan Newsletter, founded in 1903, was the first newspaper printed in Yunnan. It was a government newsletter, carrying information regarding government work, with little local news. Since then, various types of newspapers, official, private, half official, half private, came and went in this region. There was a surge of newspapers in Yunnan during the Chinese-Japanese war (1937-1945), mostly due to talents from more advanced northern China fleeing to Kunming in the wake of Japanese invasion. But right before the establishment of the People Republic, the then Nationalist government purged newspapers in Kunming, leaving almost nothing. After 1949, especially during the reform era, news industry in Kunming started to flourish again (Wang, 2008).

Spring City Evening News (hereafter *Evening News*), a market oriented tabloid published by the provincial party organ, *Yunnan Daily*, was founded in 1980, and is said to be China's first evening newspaper created anew in the post-Cultural Revolution era. It soon gained popularity for criticizing government work and officials' corruption, as well as celebrating the multi-ethnic culture of Yunnan (Wang, 2008). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as part of the trend of publishing market oriented metro papers, a few other metro papers were created, including *Metropolis Times*, first published in 1999 by the municipal party organ, *Kunming Daily*; *Dianchi Morning News*, another metro paper by

Yunnan Daily, and *East Continent Times*, first published by Yunnan Propaganda Department, plus *New Life Daily* (hereafter *New Life*) and *Yunnan Information Daily* (hereafter *Information Daily*) (Wang, 2008). *New Life* is the reinvention of a publication of Yunnan Association of the Disabled, a semi-official organization under the direction of the provincial government. People from the association sought investments from a private company based in Fujian, which still runs the advertisement department of the paper today, and was transformed from an agency publication into a market-oriented metro paper in 2000 (Jia, 2010). First published in 1985, *Information Daily* used to be the publication of Yunnan Planning Committee, a government agency. Its metro-paper makeover was carried out by *Chengdu Business News*, a successful metro paper based in Sichuan, Yunnan's neighbor province, which invested in the paper and reinvented it in 1999 in an attempt to claim a share of the Kunming market (Xu et al., 2009). In the past few years, some of the papers failed to survive the market competition, leaving four in the sea: *Evening News*, *City Times*, *New Life* and *Information Daily*.

Among them, *Evening News* and *City Times* are the offspring of the provincial and municipal party organ, respectively, and could be labeled as semi-official papers. *New Life* still receives investment from a private enterprise. *Information Daily* is now a joint venture of Guangzhou-based Southern Daily Group and Yunnan Publishing Group, both state-own enterprises, with Southern Daily Group controlling editorial matters. These two papers could be seen as commercialized papers (Stockmann, 2010). All four papers are non-official, metro papers, as opposed to the official papers in Kunming, the *Yunnan Daily* and *Kunming Daily*. The current study was conducted at the four metro papers.

Like some-town papers elsewhere, metro papers in Kunming face fierce competition. Kunming is seen as one of the top ten most competitive media market in China (Xu et al., 2009). The first metro paper founded in Kunming was the *Evening News*. From 1980, when it was first published, through 1999, the *Evening News*'

popularity and market dominance was unchallenged, until *Chengdu Business News* invested 6 million yuan in *Information Daily* and taught a lesson to Kunming news industry on how to run a metro paper. Not long after *Information Daily* was launched, so was *Metropolis Times* (Xu et al., 2009). The newspapers war in Kunming was well underway.

Information Daily was a quick success in terms of profits, and it encouraged other government agency publications to follow suit, among them was *New Life* (Xu et al., 2009). Other new comers around that time included *East Continent Times* and *Dianchi Morning News*. Newspaper market in Kunming was all of sudden full of smoke. In 2000, to gain an edge in the competition, *Metropolis Times* started a price war, selling at just 20 cents RMB per copy (about US ¢3). Other metro papers scrambled to reduce their retail prices, which eventually caused huge losses to the papers. At one point, the retail price became so low that some retailers sold new copies of the newspapers to paper recycling facilities instead of readers to make a bit more money. To keep things under control, Yunnan propaganda authorities set a minimum price at 50 cents per copy (Xu et al., 2009).

But the newspapers later came up with new gimmicks to reduce the price. In early April 2006, *New Life* introduced an innovative method of subscribing: renting the paper. Readers pay only a fraction (36 yuan) of regular annual subscription, provided that they save all the old copies for *New Life* stuff to come collect them at the end of the year. *New Life* would then sell these old copies as recycled papers and get some money back. In early June, the *Evening News* responded by reducing its annual subscription to 60 yuan. In mid-June, *Metropolis Daily* reduced its fee to 30 yuan. Two days later, the *Evening News* further reduced the price to 25 yuan, something unheard of in China up to that point. The next day, *Metropolis Daily* reduced its subscription to a new low of 20 yuan per year. *Information Daily* followed suit, setting its one year subscription at 20 yuan (Chen, 2006; Xu et al., 2009).

Besides the price war, Kunming metro papers also fought a circulation war, each claiming having higher circulation than the competitors. One day in June 2000, *Metropolis Daily* announced that Kunming Credential Office verified the paper's daily circulation to be more than 104, 000. The next day, the *Evening News*, widely regarded as the no.1 metro paper in Kunming, claimed that it had a daily circulation of no less than 150, 000. Meanwhile, in a article published in the *Evening News*, newly created or transformed metro papers were denounced as aiming for high profit, low-price dumping and publishing exaggerated or fabricated stories, which was more or less the case (Xu et al., 2009). *New Life* soon joined the argument and released the number of copies ordered to be printed every day, ranging from 130, 000 to 200, 000, for some time as a proof of its daily circulation (Xu et al., 2009).

Harsh competition, especially the brutal price wars, brought wounds to all metro papers and forced them to consider other ways to compete. They came to realize that a better, more rational way to compete was to enhance of the quality of news and form their own specialty and personality (Chen, 2006; Sun, 2002; Xu et al., 2009). From 2006 onward, all four remaining metro papers have been readjusting their positions, constantly going through page makeovers, changing their mottos and redefining their personality. The *Evening News*, which claims the top spot among the four in terms of influence, fame and income, focused on news on Kunming as well as other cities and regions in Yunnan. The *Metropolis Times* put a lot of emphasis on local news in Kunming. In 2003, *Chengdu Business News* withdrew its funding from *Information Daily* due to disagreement with other publishers of the paper. In 2007, *Information Daily* received investment from Southern Daily Group, the parent group of *Southern Daily* and *Southern Metropolis Daily*, and took a new life. The paper set its sight on and beyond Yunnan, and showed strong interests in covering ASEAN countries. As for *New Life*, it claimed to be focusing on providing news that was of high values, namely, original, in-depth reporting and investigative journalism (Xu et al., 2009). To this date, the four metro papers have not

settled down on their ranking. Except for the *Evening News*, which has been long recognized as the no.1, the relative position of the other three has been in constant change, which keeps the newspaper industry in Kunming restless and dynamic.

Despite the chaos and loss, competitions among Kunming's metro papers eventually benefited the local news industry as a whole. Through these battles and contests, journalists and executives of these papers learned to do better journalism as well as better marketing, readers learned to discern good papers from bad ones, and the media market grew and matured. In a region that has traditionally been viewed as economically and culturally backward, Kunming's newspapers industry actually has gained a lot of national attention through its dramatic competition, and the industry itself is seen as at an upper-middle level in the country (Chen, 2006; Sun, 2002; Xu et al., 2009).

CHAPTER 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is a cultural inquiry into journalism. Taking the concept of culture as central (Carey, 1992; Geertz, 1973) and drawing on literature concerning journalists' professional ideology (Deuze, 2005; Glasser & Ettema, 1989), journalists' symbolic practice (Berkowitz & Eko, 2007; Durham, 2008; Robinson, 2007; Ryfe, 2009; Singer, 2006), and journalists as a community (Zelizer, 1997/1993a, 1997/1993b), my study explores journalism as an occupational culture with particular substance and form (Geertz, 1973; Schudson 1997/1989; Trice, 1993).

A cultural perspective on journalism is a fertile field of inquiry (Zelizer, 2004) that directs attention not only to media messages but to the people who produce them, while situating news work in a broader social and cultural context (Carey, 1992; Hall, 1982). Well conducted projects in this vein should sensitizes researchers to things missed in other modes of study, providing data and analysis that helps fill gaps in the more conventional literature on causes and effects. This approach directs attention to the interaction among journalists themselves as a collectivity—their shared worldviews, values and patterned behavior, as well as to nuances and symbolic meanings of their work practices. The approach also calls for viewing journalistic ideals, conventions and practices as dynamic and contingent on situational and historical context, mindful of a changing journalistic landscape as well as of variation across setting and time (Zelizer, 1997/1993a, 2004).

Culture, Communication and Journalism

The theoretical underpinnings for this cultural inquiry derive from two main sources: Carey's (1992) ritual view of communication, and Geertz's (1973) theory of culture. For Carey (1992), communication, with journalism as a key component, is a meaning-generating action that contributes to maintainance of culture in a given society. As a human action hinging on and fortifying shared beliefs through time among a group

of people, communication from this perspective is akin to ritual. This contrasts with a more mechanistic transmission view, in which communication of messages across distance serves to maintain social control. Communication obviously occurs in both time and space, and contributes to both social control and cultural maintenance. Carey does not advocate substituting one view for the other, but rather points out that scholars should attend to how communication maintains as well as transforms shared beliefs, or the interpretation of human experience expressed by communication, in other words, what is said and the dialogue of meanings. Therefore, Carey maintains the purpose of communication studies is by and large hermeneutics. Instead of searching for laws, functions, causes and effects, Carey sees communication studies as extending human conversation and helping to forge a coherent cultural world for groups of people. Scholars of communication and culture have used this lens to study communities of journalists, as I propose to do here.

Carey was influenced by Clifford Geertz (1973), who articulates a fundamental view of culture as a meaning system and provides direction for what cultural inquiry ought to accomplish. Geertz sees culture as the web of significance that humans themselves spin and suspend themselves within—an interwoven system of interpretable signs that is "not a power to which human society phenomena could be causally attributed" but rather "a context within which social phenomenon could be intelligibly, that is, thickly, described" (p. 14). Culture in this sense is not a fixed entity, but contingent upon historical circumstances, and resides in particularities that require concerted study and unmasking in order to arrive at the said, not just the event or behavior per se.

Both Carey and Geertz hold that the central task of cultural inquiry is searching for meaning, not through generalization of universal laws, but through interpretation of specifics, however incomplete it may be. "Meaning in this view is not representation but a constituting activity whereby humans interactively endow an elastic though resistant

world with enough coherence and order to support their purposes" (Carey, 1992, p.85). The meaning and world under investigation in this study are those of a group of journalists, situated in a broader social context and in connection with other social groups.

In short, a cultural perspective rests on the proposition that reality is socially constructed and culturally defined (Carey, 1992), with news being one form of social construction of reality (Berkowitz, 1997). Cultural inquiry arrives at interpretation, rather than generalization and prediction. It also pays more attention to the complex context of a subject under investigation, and is not so much concerned with individual behavior but with how individuals interact within a social environment (Carey, 1992; Geertz, 1973; Hall, 1982).

Many studies of journalists and their work take a normative perspective centered on notions of professional ideology that postulate journalism to be objective, fair, accurate, and independent from power. Works about journalism's failings as a political watchdog, and other ways it falls short of liberal democratic ideals, take this approach (e.g. Bennett et al., 2007; Merrill, 1974; Merrill et al., 2001). This perspective has its uses but is limited by its narrow focus on professional ideals and neglect of broader connections between journalism and other social institutions. A cultural perspective that sees journalism as one form of social construction of reality and a cultural practice that shapes as well as is shaped by specific cultural context (Berkowitz, 1997, 2011) attempts to explain a phenomenon such as professionalism in relation to this broader context. Unlike the normative perspective, cultural inquiry does not intend to make judgment, but to provide understanding.

Sociological approaches to journalism share some commonalities with cultural studies, likewise viewing journalism as a form of social action that is part of a broader society, and emphasizing explanatory rather than predictive research. A sociological perspective may illuminate interactional determinants and organizational constraints,

while a cultural inquiry explores the meanings such actions bear for those who carry them out (Geertz, 1973; Swidler, 1986). From the perspective of the sociology of journalism, many studies have explored the process of news production, including how individual characteristics, organizational routines, professional norms, media institution characteristics, social system and cultural context help determine what gets into the news media (Berkowitz, 1997; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The cultural perspective, while certainly concerned with these elements, focuses on how journalists make sense of the process (Berkowitz, 2011; Zelizer, 2004).

Sociological study may reveal interactional determinants such as pattern of social interactions, relations and structures, while cultural study examines symbolic determinants such as values, beliefs, attitudes, and taken-for-granted assumptions (Schudson, 1997/1989). Sociological inquiry such as Gaye Tuchman's (1978) study of news production routines and Shoemaker and Vos' (2009) study of the gatekeeping process endeavors to explain the process of the symbolic production; while cultural inquiry endeavors to interpret the meaning of those symbols and production actions (Ettema et al., 1997/1987). Examples include studies of journalism as a cultural practice (Berkowitz & Eko, 2007; Durham, 2008) and of news as cultural text that expresses, maintains or transforms cultural meanings such as taken-for-granted values and collective memories (Berkowitz, 2011; Gans, 1979). Sociological inquiry into journalism asks what news is and how it turns out like it does. For cultural inquiry, the question is what news tells us about the culture of the profession as well as the enveloping local, regional and/or national culture where it is produced (Berkowitz, 1997, 2011).

A word might also be said about the school known as critical cultural studies, represented by Hall (1982). In this perspective, the central theme is ideology, or meaning in the service of power. Berkowitz (2011) and Carey (1992), however, see meaning as more variegated. In their view, ideology is only one form of meaning system, highly organized and explicit, and with a narrow range of articulation (Swidler, 1986), while

cultural meanings in the practice and text of journalism are more diverse. Ideology, class and power relations are not excluded from the current study, nor are they the central problems. Rather, they are treated as part of the fabric of meaning creation.

Journalism as an Occupational Culture

To say that journalism is an occupational culture is to say that journalists form a collectivity sustained by shared values, beliefs and practices. If culture is the system of meaning that guides human actions and allows them to make sense of their day to day behavior, then the occupational culture of journalism is the system of meaning that guides journalists' professional action and allows them to make sense of what they do as journalists. Seen through the cultural prism, the world of news becomes "more than just reporters' professional code of actions or the social arrangements of reporters and editors," but rather "a complex and multidimensional lattice of meanings for all those involved in journalism" (Zelizer, 2004, p. 175). To view journalism as a culture in its own right is to view journalists as a collectivity and community, bounded and maintained through patterned behavior and shared meanings, as are neighborhoods, nations, and human society in general (Carey, 1992; Zelizer, 1997/1993a, b).

An occupational culture contains two major dimensions: networks of meanings contained in sets of shared, sometimes taken-for-granted beliefs and values, or the *substance* of the culture, and mechanisms for expressing and affirming these beliefs, or cultural *forms*, including practices, behavior, myths, ceremonies, symbols, languages and gestures, rituals and rites (Schudson 1997/1989; Trice, 1993; Trice & Beyer, 1984). The specifics of the substance and form of an occupational culture are formed uniquely in the context of a particular occupation (Guzman et al., 2008).

Journalism culture therefore can be examined through identifying and analyzing its substance and forms. As Hanitzsch (2007) has articulated, "Journalism culture becomes manifest in the way journalists think and act; it can be defined as a particular set

of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously and unconsciously, legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others" (p. 369).

Tackling both the substance and form of a journalism culture, this project thus explores the ideas, values and beliefs of the journalists under study, as well as the practices and behaviors that express, affirm or materialize those ideas, values and beliefs. The substance of their work incorporates ascribed meanings, while the form exhibits how these meanings become materialized in actual practice. My study takes an emic approach to examine journalism culture, endeavoring to understand the views of its members or participants in their specific cultural context, rather than an etic approach, aimed at cross-cultural comparison from an external vantage point. The emic approach is an "inductive bottom-up strategy [that] would necessarily produce culture-bound definitions that do not easily translate from one cultural context to another" (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 370). In other words, this study is more about comprehending one particular culture than about locating similarities and differences with respect to other cultures or external standards.

More specifically, this study explores the journalism culture under investigation through examining journalists' understanding of who they are and the nature of their job as journalists, and the values, ideals and standards they uphold for their work, including their self evaluation of what counts as success, as well as resulting practice. Other cultural forms, including journalists' special lingos and particular ways of socialization, that help to bond them as a community will also be examined. Taken together, these analyses aim at understanding, under a specific cultural context, not just what kind of journalism but also "what kinds of journalists are made in the process" of doing journalism, as well as the "spirit that is expressed in practice" (Carey, 1997, p. 331).

Quite a few studies have explored how journalists give meaning to their work, including their role perceptions, shared values and professional ideology, although not all explicitly address journalism as an occupational culture. Gans (1979), for example,

examines reporters' and editors' taken-for-granted, enduring values and professional belief system. Schudson (1978) analyzes from a historical perspective how objectivity became the core of American journalism's professional ideology. Singer (2006) explores how adopting new technologies is pushing for change of journalists' idea of who they are as they confront the challenge of bloggers. She finds that professional journalists define themselves as enjoying freedom but at the same time responsible for their work, to differentiate from bloggers and reinforce their sense of authority. Robinson's study (2007) shows how use of digital technology is changing news production routines, and how multimedia production in practice leads to a redefinition of the meaning of journalists' work—what used to be akin to assembling a car has become taking the readers on a road trip. And Ryfe (2011) finds that, in response to the rise of digital media, the newsroom culture at a daily newspaper resists changes to traditional practices out of which reporters have developed their collective identity.

Analogous studies about Chinese journalists reveal diverse meanings of doing journalism in the context of that society. Journalists in China draw on various sources in forming their professional image, including, depending on generation and experience, Party propaganda icons, ancient Confucian intellectuals, famous Western journalists, and media entrepreneurs (Pan & Lu, 2003). Some journalists find occupational meaning in the opportunity to monitor authorities, serve common people and promote social justice (Burgh, 2003; Chen et al., 1998; Polumbaum, 2008). Some pursue personal aspirations or simply enjoy the excitement of doing journalism (Polumbaum, 2008). Some emphasize that journalism can be a money-making gig (Zha, 1995). This study benefits from, but also strives to transcend, previous studies with a more clearly articulated concept of journalism as an occupational culture, and through a more systematic cultural inquiry that analyzes both its substance and form.

Defining journalism in terms of occupational culture by no means suggests a study of work in isolation. Rather, to answer the question of why a certain journalism

culture turns out like it does, examination of factors beyond as well as below the occupational level is required to situate the work among the intertwined levels of individuals, organizations and the broader social system (Berkowitz, 2011; Carey, 1992; Ettema et al., 1997/1987; Pasti, 2005; Schudson, 1997/1989; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986; Viall, 1992). If the occupational culture of journalism is at the mezzo level, then there are factors at the macro and micro levels influencing it (Hanitzsch, 2006). Shoemaker and Vos' (2009) work on gatekeeping provides an excellent example of this attention to multiple levels and their interactions. These scholars explore how factors at different levels (individual, routine, organizational, institutional, social) help determine the content of news. They also stress the interaction among factors and depart somewhat from the notion of a hierarchical relationship among different levels (as proposed by Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), noting that interactions may be multidirectional.

Berkowitz (2011) also emphasizes the importance of exploring factors at different levels of analysis in studying what shapes meanings as well as content of journalists' work: at the individual level, for instance, factors such as age, education, life experience, and so on; at the organizational level, the organization's history and financing; at the professional level, occupation-wide practices and behavioral patterns; at the institutional level, media structure and press system; at the cultural level, national cultural traditions and transformation as well as global culture. It is not feasible to address all factors at all levels in any single study, including this one. The main theoretical point is that journalism culture is situated in a broader cultural environment in a given society. In my study, the analysis takes account of organizational, professional and institutional dynamics as well as elements of the larger socio-cultural environment.

My research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What constitutes the substance of journalism culture in Kunming, or the constituents of meaning journalists ascribe to and derive from their work?

- How do Kunming journalists perceive their roles (i.e. what do they think they do)?
- How do Kunming journalists define their collective identity (i.e. who do they think they are)?
- What shared values, ideals and beliefs do Kunming journalists hold, including what they consider good journalism or aspire to achieve, and what they consider success in their work that makes it worth doing?
- What aspects of their work do Kunming journalists find contradictory to their occupational values, ideals and beliefs and how do they react?

RQ2: What forms does journalism culture in Kunming take, i.e., how are the meanings Kunming journalists draw from work expressed, affirmed or materialized?

- How do meanings emerge through journalists' common practices and behaviors?
- Other cultural forms that bond Kunming journalists as a community?

RQ3: Why is this journalism culture what it is? What context-specific factors shape it?

- How do organizational factors influence the journalism culture?
- How does the social environment shape the journalism culture?
- How do broader national and global factors shape the journalism culture?

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Situated in the qualitative or naturalistic paradigm, this study endeavors to provide an understanding of human experience based on research in natural settings and interpretation of meanings arising from those settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Jackson et al., 2007; Pauly, 1991). My interest is in discerning and accounting for the particularity of human experience in a specific context rather than arriving at generalizations or universal rules (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Jackson et al. 2007; Jankowski & Wester,1991; Lindlof & Taylor 2002). My specific goal is to provide a plausible understanding and interpretation of the meanings journalists in Kunming give to their work.

Methods Overview

While this study is not an ethnography in the extended anthropological sense, it uses ethnographical methods of participant observation and interviewing, as well as documentary research. The large literature based on observations in news organizations yields rich findings about aspects of news work, including routines and norms that are otherwise invisible to people outside media circles (Fishman, 1980; Tuchman, 1978), decision-making processes of news selection (Berkowitz, 1989), taken-for-granted values that guide story choices (Gans, 1979), and ideological bias involved in news production (Gitlin, 2003).

Scholars also have conducted newsroom observation and interviews in Chinese news organizations in different eras. These studies reveal, among other findings, Chinese journalists' aspirations and experimentation for press reform and political change in the 1980s (Polumbaum, 1990; Hsiao & Yang, 1990); Chinese media negotiations in serving both political authorities and economic interests in the 1990s (Zhao, 1998); reporters' ideals for carrying out investigative journalism in the moral traditions of upright ancient officials (Burgh, 2003); fragmented discourses of professionalism among journalists, entailing roles of Party mouthpiece, adopting western professionalism and admiration of

media entrepreneurs(Pan & Lu, 2003; and explanations for journalism corruption in a newly freed market environment (Zha, 2005). Scholars have examined how Chinese journalists deal with new market demands within a restrained political environment, discovering use of non-routine, improvised practices and boundary-testing (Pan, 2000) and creation of news products that combine a "socialist face" and a "capitalist body" (He, 2000). In interviews with journalists from different types of news organizations in Beijing, Polumbaum (2008) showed that 21st century Chinese journalists have no shortage of agency, passion and ideals.

These works provide evidence of the methodological strengths of field research in studying journalists and their practices. Methods of participant observation and in-depth interviewing are open to contingencies and unexpected situations emerging in the field, allowing for flexibility in data collection, and adaptations to produce more nuanced understandings (Berkowitz, 1989; Cottle, 2007). Triangulation among observation, interview and document research helps to qualify or correct speculative theoretical claims with rich evidence; and grounded studies are all the more necessary in the current environment to determine how the latest trends in multi-platform and digital news production are unfolding in journalists' daily practices (Cottle, 2007). The results of such studies may not be absolute rules and may still contain a fair amount of uncertainty, but at the same time they provide understanding with greater depth and more nuanced insights that other methods may not yield (Berkowitz, 1989).

Conducting Field Research

Clifford Geertz (1973) is generally cited as the scholar who brought the "interpretive turn" to anthropology (Kraidy & Murphy, 2008; Walsh, 2004). This school of thought sees culture as a stratified, multi-layer meaning system, incorporating moral standards, values and beliefs, with human behavior viewed as symbolic action signifying those meanings. From this perspective, the researcher endeavors to describe and interpret

the behaviors by sorting out the layers of meaning (Geertz, 1973; Shweder, 1996). This approach to study and analysis is particular to the community studied and demonstrates the complex specificity and circumstantiality of that community (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001; Geertz, 1973; Jackson et al. 2007).

My aim is to provide what Geertz terms a "thick description" of the journalism culture in Kunming, China, discerning layers of meanings journalists associate with their work, and connecting these meanings to journalists' practices and other cultural forms by which these meanings are conveyed. I also connect meanings and their signifying forms to broader social, economic and political circumstances that help explain why Kunming's journalism culture operates as it does.

As noted earlier, the current study is not an ethnography in the strict anthropological sense. I spent more than three months in various newsrooms in Kunming, which by conventional standards is a rather short period of fieldwork. Taking the advice of Jankowski & Wester (1991), I thus avoid calling the current study an ethnography. Again, it is a study of journalism culture using ethnographic methods.

Discussing his study of news selection processes at a network-affiliate television station, Berkowitz (1989) addressed five methodological issues that he says face researchers using naturalistic approaches. These are issues of entrée, the role of the researcher, data collection, reliability assessment, and incorporating the unexpected. I discuss each of these in turn.

Access

A crucial step for any participant observation study is to gain access to the field. The researcher needs to find the gatekeeper, or a sponsor, or perhaps both—people who are knowledgeable, respected and trustworthy and can get you in the door (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001). I will describe my own experience gaining entry to research sites at

Kunming metro papers in some detail to show how following chains of connections as well as a certain amount of serendipity was involved.

My sponsor turned out to be a friend of friend, who then connected me with some of the key gatekeepers of desired research sites in my home city of Kunming. I began the quest in January 2010, while visiting family, first contacting a close friend since childhood who worked at a local radio station to see if she could introduce me to some journalists. My friend put me into contact with Ms. L, a close friend of hers but someone I did not know, and said Ms. L was a very social person and knew a lot of journalists. Soon after, Ms. L put together a dinner gathering and invited a few journalist friends of hers, among them a newspaper executive. We had a great conversation over dinner, and the executive said it should not be a problem for me to do research at his newspaper—which I will refer to from now on as Paper A. I paid for the dinner, which is the norm in Chinese culture, to show my respect and gratitude.

To actually start my fieldwork, I arrived in Kunming on July 11, 2011, and was anxious to enter the field. I reached the executive I'd met over a year before, and he said he would introduce me to his boss, the chief editor of Paper A. After several rounds of texting and phone calls over five days, he finally called to ask, "Can you be here at around 11 o'clock?" I answered yes without giving it much thought.

I met the chief editor in his office, gave him a copy of my résumé, and told him I was hoping to work in his newsroom while conducting research for my dissertation. He did not question much before agreeing and said that I could start the next day. His arrangement was for me to work for one of Paper A's weekly publications, which emphasized in-depth reporting on local, national and international news, saying there was a need for people who knew English to help gather information on international news. I said OK.

A few days before, I had called Ms. L and invited her for dinner. I told her I was about to start my fieldwork, what I tried to achieve, and thanked her for helping me to

gain access. She told me that the most popular metro newspaper in Kunming was no longer Paper A, but Paper B, and suggested that I should do my research with Paper B. Right at our table in the restaurant, she placed a call to the deputy chief editor of Paper B, who was not in town. But she went ahead and set up a dinner gathering with the executive when he returned. On the very evening of the day I met the chief editor of Paper A, I went to dinner with a group of journalists from Paper B, including the deputy chief editor. I told him about my project and my intention of working for him while doing research. Without much hesitation, he agreed and asked me to meet him the next day in his office. So I did. As a result, in addition to working as an English translator and editor for Paper A, I had a gig as a web editor for the website of Paper B.

A little over a month into my field research, I felt I needed to expand my knowledge of other news organizations. By now, I realized the four local metro papers were closely interconnected. In the newsrooms of Paper A and B, the other two metro papers, Paper C and D, were read daily and constantly mentioned and compared. Simply hearing people at Paper A and B talking about the other two papers so much made me curious and prompted me to reach out to them.

I found the gatekeeper to Paper C on Sina Weibo, China's most popular social network, thanks to the function called Identity Verification, which many people employ so their verified professional title will appear on their weibo home page. He was an executive at Paper C, and I signed up to follow him on weibo. To my surprise, he sent me a private message on weibo, asking if I was a "media person." I jumped on this opportunity, replied and told him what I was doing, and asked if I could visit his newsroom. He was very responsive, quickly replying that he would talk to his boss and see if we could make an appointment. The next week, he sent me another private message, asking me to go to his office. I met him and gained his permission to stop by the newsroom unannounced and do some observation. This was in early September.

By then, the remaining local metro paper I hoped to visit was Paper D. I was not in a hurry because Paper D was in the midst of leadership change. I waited until after things were settled and then contacted the chief editor by email – his email address was on Sina Weibo as well. I waited for another month or so before following up, finally making an appointment with him and interviewing him in mid-October. I also interviewed another employee at Paper D, an experienced journalist that one of my high school pals put me in touch with.

Thus, I was able to gain at least some access to all four metro papers in Kunming, spending the most time at Papers A and B, somewhat less at Paper C, and the least at Paper D. I did actual "participation" at Paper A and B, did observation and interviews at Paper A, B, and C, and was only able to interview two people from Paper D, one the chief editor and the other a veteran who had been with Paper D for almost 10 years.

Overall, I found gaining access to the research sites easier than I'd anticipated. There were no major obstacles or downright refusals, and the people in charge did not even ask me for documentation—although I did supply my University of Iowa name card and a one-page resume listing my education and working experience, which seemed satisfactory to the gatekeepers. In retrospect, my hometown connections as well as my educational credentials helped me: I was among the very few high school graduates from Kunming to attend college at the prestigious Peking University, and among the small minority going abroad for graduate study, having earned a master's degree and now pursuing a doctoral degree in the US, the sort of background that automatically earns respect in China. At the same time, I reminded myself to remain modest. I told the newspaper executives that I had come to learn from them and their reporters, which of course was true, and expressed my sincere appreciation for their support, which indeed was heartfelt. I was honest with them about who I was and what I was doing. I also promised to protect individuals' confidentiality, which I have done by not using real

names or associating any informants with specifically identified workplaces. All these elements facilitated my access.

The Research Process

I spent about 14 weeks doing fieldwork in Kunming, from July through October 2011, spending at least part of every workday—anywhere from three to eight hours—in one of the newsrooms. In the first stage of my research, mid-July through the end of August, I worked at both Papers A and B while conducting participant observation and some interviewing. In the second stage, September through late October, I stopped working for Papers A and B to focus on research, mostly observation with limited participation and interviews. Besides working, observing and interviewing inside the newsrooms, I also accompanied reporters on nine different reporting trips, observing their activities and occasionally assisting with the reporting.

The working experience, although time-consuming and at times tiring, proved essential for my further research, familiarizing me with both the news organizations and many people working for them. Interactions with people at work often supplied valuable data as well. Taking part in news production, sitting in on newsroom meetings, and simply experience the ambiance of these places were extremely helpful. Once I stepped away from participating to focus more on being a researcher, however, I had more time and room to think and assess. I was still in the newsroom day in and day out, still went to meetings, talked with informants and went on assignments with reporters, so the interaction with people in the field continued. I interviewed quite a few editors and reporters with whom I had spent time working, and also people with whom I had no direct working relationship. I found that participating in the workplace yielded more information regarding behavior and practice whereas interviewing generated more stories and opinions. Throughout the research period, I felt that people treated me with openness and kindness.

Observing

Once in the field, I tried to use all my senses to attend to a wide range of happenings, both routine, mundane activities as well as singular or unusual ones—a state that researchers dub as "being on" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001). I made myself pay attention to as many details as possible, from people's attire to the devices on their desks, their smoking habits and their conversations. I was often multitasking, working on my own assignments while taking mental and/or written notes about other people's behaviors, words, interactions and reactions.

My observations took place in three kinds of settings: in the newsroom, during reporting trips and during social events. On all occasions, I tried not to be intrusive. When appropriate, I tried to be part of the group rather than an odd presence. In the newsroom, my interactions with reporters and editors as a coworker generally centered on the tasks at hand. At newsroom meetings, where executives would be addressing a roomful of people, I often chose a seat to the side or back and took notes.

Observing reporters at work could be tricky. Some reporters stopped their work upon noticing me standing next to them. So whenever possible, I settled somewhere nearby but without getting too close. Things became more relaxed as reporters got to know me better and got used to me being around and writing in my notebook. But there still were times when my observations clearly made people uneasy. One night, for instance, wishing to learn more about how editors worked at night, I decided to stay past dinnertime. For hours, I stood behind the editors and watched them putting together pages. For a couple of times, one editor turned around, looking puzzled and asking me to find a seat. I explained to him that I could observe better while standing. I asked him questions from time to time, and he was nice enough to answer them, but not entirely comfortable (August 17).

When out on assignments, reporters' attentions usually focused on the task. I asked reporters to tell others that I was an intern, since it is commonplace for staff

reporters to take interns on reporting trips. When a reporter was gathering information, I shadowed him/her and took notes, only occasionally asking questions.

Usually things went smoothly, but on one reporting trip, I got into a little trouble. I had accompanied a reporter to a hospital pursuing a story about a hospital-patient dispute. We were received by the vice president and spokesman of the hospital, who first asked to see our reporter's certificate. The reporter showed him his, and I said I was an intern. The spokesman then said he was not ready to do a formal interview and asked us not to take notes. After a while, as he discussed the incident and voiced his opinions, he seemed to be engaging in a formal interview and I started to take notes, whereupon the man said to me:

"Don't take notes! Give me this page of notes."

"It won't be in the paper," the reporter said in a friendly manner.

The altercation continued for a bit, and the hospital official was very firm about demanding the notes. I was a bit stunned by the situation since this had never happened to me in my prior experience as a reporter. But I did not want to ruin my colleague's interview.

"We'll give it to you later," the reporter continued diplomatically.

"Give it to me now! Or I'm not going to do the interview with you," the official said.

The reporter noted good-humoredly that the official was "very stubborn," to which he responded, "I am stubborn."

"All right. Give it to him," the reporter said to me. So I tore the offending page from my notebook and handed it over. The hospital spokesman took a look at it, put it down, and said, "Now let's start the interview" (September 26, I).

I joined lunch or dinner gatherings with reporters and editors several times, and was invited to an executive's wedding and Karaoke party afterwards. On these social occasions, people were in casual mode and, although they knew I was a researcher,

seemed to accept me as just another colleague and friend, which enabled me to observe a different side of these journalists. I did not take notes during such gatherings, but would write down my observation afterwards.

Overall, knowing my presence could be a disturbance to the natural setting, I made the effort not to be intrusive in and outside the newsroom so that I could see people's natural behavior at work as well as off duty. To the most part, I think I achieved my goal.

Interviewing

Interviewing invites people to talk about and reflect on what they do (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003). I found myself engaged in various types of interviews—from the random chat in informal conversation to unstructured interviews without a question list to semi-structured interviews with pre-determined questions to cover (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001). I approached interviewing as a negotiated and collaborative process with my informants, requiring me to listen actively, pay attention to what people said and were trying to say, encourage them to express themselves freely, and maintain a non-judgmental, eager-to-learn face (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

My frequent casual chats with reporters and editors while I was working in the newsrooms sometimes evolved into longer unstructured interviews, in which I mostly let the person talk without a pre-planned direction. There were also times when I sat down with an informant for a somewhat more formal interview. I always made sure people knew I was there to do research.

Most interviews I conducted were one-on-one, semi-structured interviews employing a list of questions I wanted to ask and periodically checked to make sure I covered them. Although I did not always ask questions in the same order, I tried to ask them in the same way with a consistent meaning. Other than my questions and follow-up questions, I did not talk or comment, but rather let interviewees speak as much as

possible. Of nearly 50 interviews I conducted, seven were tape recorded with people's permission—either because they occurred during a meal when I was not able to take notes, or because I was talking to several people at the same time. I took notes by hand for the rest. The following chart summarizes the interviewees.

	Paper A	Paper B	Paper C	Paper D	Television	Total
Reporters	8	9	5	1	3	26
Supervisors	4	4	1	0	0	9
Executives	2	1	1	1	0	5
Web editors	4	4	0	0	0	8
Page editors	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total	18	19	7	2	3	49

Among the interviewees, 33 are men, and 16 are women. Although there are roughly equal number of men and women among reporters, at the supervisor and executive level, men outnumber women in the newsrooms I visited. Among the 14 supervisors and executives I interviewed, only 2 were women.

I spent considerably more time with reporters and their supervisors, rather than copy editors who put together the pages and designers. In the Kunming newsrooms, news production is accomplished by roughly three units: one gathers information (reporters, photographers and their supervisors), one puts the information on pages (copy editors and their supervisors), and one does graphic design. Within the news gathering unit are different sections, such as Society News, Politics and Law News and so on, covering different news beats, and each section has a section head called the reporters' supervisor in this study. These supervisors are in charge of assigning reporting tasks and quality control of important stories before they are put on the pages. The three units operate in distinct spheres, separated by work space as well as by schedule. Reporters and their supervisors (i.e. the section heads) work from morning through early evening in

their own areas, and editors and designers work from late afternoon through past mid-night in different areas. With only three months in the field, I chose to focus on reporters who gather information and write the "first draft" of the news, and therefore are at the foundational level of news production. They also are at the bottom of the newsroom hierarchy and face correspondingly more constraints than those at higher levels. In addition, I expected that front-line reporters' experiences and interactions with society would yield rich and complex data. The emphasis thus is on reporters' views and practices, supplemented by perspectives of their supervisors and executives—referring to chief editors or deputy chief editors in this study, who are experienced reporters themselves.

In selecting reporters to interview, I tried to choose people of different ages and genders, from different regions, with various working experiences: young, fresh reporters as well as veteran ones, general assignment as well as beat reporters, and reporters with specialties such as investigative and online reporting. Overall, I made an effort to include a demographic and occupational variety.

In speaking with executives in all four news organizations, I asked a different set of questions than those used with reporters, about general trends in the news industry, their strategic outlook and analysis, and their opinions regarding the overall situation of the journalism profession. In short, these interviews were more focused on the "big picture" rather than on these individuals' views of their own jobs.

In addition, I interviewed a couple of people who could be considered as "key informants" (Russell, 2002), because they had been in the industry for a long time, worked in various news organizations, and knew a lot of history and many people in the business. Some of the information they provided helped me to triangulate accounts from other sources.

Interviews were conducted in various settings. Most of my sessions with reporters took place at their desks, with me grabbing a chair to sit next to them. Sometimes there

were others around, sometimes not. Occasionally, we talked in a meeting area. I spoke with executives usually in their offices. In a few cases of reporters and supervisors whom I knew somewhat better and who were amenable, I interviewed them over a meal or tea. I encountered several of the interviewees from my work practice, but quite a few reporters were people I never spoken with prior to the interview, who agreed to talk to me after I explained the project and promised their anonymity.

The duration of each interview ranged from 30 minutes to close to two hours. Except for a few people who tended to give short answers, most of the interviewees were eager to talk, apparently had a lot to say, and seemed glad that someone would listen. Veteran journalists especially had stories of unforgettable adventures and bizarre encounters that they were very happy to share.

Fieldnotes

Taking fieldnotes, as a major task for field researchers, requires some thought (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). My notebook was with me all the time, and during both working and continuing research stages, I took notes whenever I could—at editors' meetings, after spontaneous conversations, when I observed something interesting, and of course during interviews. If I could not take notes as the events occurred, I would jot down something right after. At the end of each fieldwork day, I went over my notes the same night, or sometimes the next day, filling in gaps, making clarifications and adding comments, so my "jot notes" became expanded notes. I had three notebooks full of notes by the end of my fieldwork, including my interview notes. Occasionally, when a computer was available, or when I had the chance to type, I would type my notes into the computer. These writings, in my notebooks or as computer files, constitute my original fieldnotes.

Upon returning to the US, I spent two months transcribing everything in my notebooks, as well as my taped interviews. My original notes were a mixture of Chinese

and English. I tried to take notes in English as much as possible in the field, especially in descriptions of events, scenes, behaviors and so on. People's conversation and speeches were mostly in Chinese for two main reasons: 1) to preserve the original expression and 2) lack of time to do instant translations. When transcribing notes into my computer, I preserved the English and Chinese in the original notes. I mostly maintained the original content, but added material to make sections complete or clearer. If I needed to add information, I typed it in English. I also added some methodological and analytical notes, clearly marked as such. Altogether, I had 72 field entries, covering 59 days of fieldwork.

Coding and Sorting Data

I first open coded and then categorized my fieldnotes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Open-coding consisted of assigning labels (essentially key words) to each entry to indicate people, events, location, cases, and key concepts as they emerged from the notes while I was transcribing. Many labels such as those indicating patterned behavior (e.g. undercover reporting) and concepts (e.g. making a difference, investigative reporting) emerged repeatedly; other labels were later combined because journalists often mention them together or interchangeably (I indicate this with a slash—such as social responsibility/social progress). Next, I set up an Excel spread sheet that contains 17 categories, and the labels of each fieldnote entry were put under all or some of these categories: Date (of entry), Paper (the newspaper mentioned in the entry), People (people mentioned in the entry), Project (my working assignment mentioned in the entry), Cases (specific incidents, events, or stories mentioned in the entry), Collective Identity, Role Perception, Values and Beliefs, Obstacles, Reactions and Attitudes toward Obstacles, Common Practices, Bonding and other Cultural Forms, Technology, New Trend, Media Institution (elements at the institutional level), Social and Cultural Influence, and Global Influence.

For example, fieldnote entry of July 19, 2011 has 10 labels that are put under eight categories in the spread sheet (terms in the parenthesis are the labels): Date (7.19), Paper (Paper A, Paper B), People (LW, LC), Cases (Guo Meimei), Obstacles (official approval of news stories), Technology (iPhone 4, weibo), Media Institution (marketization), Social and Cultural Influence (lack of trust).

This is how I sorted and organized all 72 entries of my fieldnotes.

Role in the Newsroom

A researcher's role in the field may vary by degree of participation, ranging from passive participation, whereby the researcher is a bystanders and "pure" observer with no interaction, to complete participation, whereby the researcher takes on the role of a full member, gets involved in activities and even takes on responsibilities. Modes in between could be moderate to active participation. Eventually, a researcher's final position in the field is the result of negotiations between researcher and subjects in light of the specific situation in the field (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

In the first stage of my fieldwork, when I was working for Papers A and B, my participation was by and large active since I engaged in production activities in both newsrooms. At Paper A, I had weekly meetings with my supervising editor to discuss story ideas. I also assigned articles to an intern who was working with me, wrote some articles myself, edited articles when they were done, and sent them to copy editors on Sunday for final production. At Paper B's website, my web editing work included coming up with projects and putting story packages together, hosting interviews via microblog, producing multimedia content, and writing commentary to be posted online. As a temporary worker, I did not get involved in the full range of activities in the newsroom, only those immediately related to my assigned work. I differed from regular staff in that I always set aside time to write down observations and reflections as my workday proceeded, and paid attention to events, behaviors and conversations that were

not directly related to my work role. My status combined co-worker and researcher. In the second stage of my fieldwork, I became a moderate participant. I no longer took part in daily newsroom activities, and spent more time doing observation or conducting interviews. My interactions became mostly research related rather than work related.

From the start, I made efforts to establish rapport with people in the field and foster a sense of mutual trust (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001), and I tried my best to be open, warm, non-judgmental, non-pretentious and eager to learn (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). To these ends, I was honest about my intentions, practiced reciprocity by helping in news production and sharing my experiences, and communicated my respect for the people and organizations I was studying. But it sometimes took time to establish rapport. My very first attempt to reach out to reporters at Paper A, where I ordinarily sat in the editor's section of the huge newsroom, was awkward. One afternoon, without much newspaper work to do, I exited my cubicle, walked over to the reporters' section and wandered through their area with notebook in hand. Several reporters and their supervisors looked at me with suspicion, and some stopped doing what they were doing. I did end up talking with a couple of reporters after approaching them and introducing myself, and they were friendly. But after that, I adopted a different approach. I asked the chief editor to introduce me to other reporter's supervisors sometime, and he did so at the editors meeting that very afternoon (August 1). From then on, the supervisors no longer cast unfavorable looks at me when I talked to reporters.

It also became easier to start conversations with reporters at Paper A after a supervisor invited me to give a lecture on the difference between Chinese and American journalism at a boot camp for new recruits. Some new reporters who got to know me through the lecture were happy to talk when I approached them in the newsroom later. At the same time, my identity in the field shifted slightly, at least in the eyes of some young reporters, from co-worker plus researcher to something like a teacher.

On my very second day at Paper B, I was introduced to reporters and editors during a group meeting. This paper invited me to talk about the development of new media in the U.S. news industry. I was reluctant at first because I was not sure if I wanted this kind of attention, but the deputy chief editor insisted and I did not want to hurt our newly established cooperation. My presentation made me a familiar face in the newsroom, at least among editors and reporters who were at my talk.

Such attention had both advantages and disadvantages for me as a researcher. The fact that people recognized me made it easier to start a conversation. At the same time, I became "Teacher Liu." I was not sure how such a position affected people's answer to me so I tried to triangulate or pressed for verification and clarification whenever I felt necessary. Often, my conversations with informants turned into two-way interviews as they asked me about American journalism and studying in the US.

About halfway through my research, I could feel that people had become used to my presence in the newsroom and felt comfortable seeing me and speaking with me. They greeted me kindly, chatted with me in a casual manner, and answered my research-related questions seriously. At the same time, my identity shifted depending on whom I was interacting with. Beyond everyone's basic knowledge about me as a doctoral student doing research on local journalists, it seemed editors saw me like a coworker; executives, mostly around my age, took me as a new friend; and reporters, mostly younger than me, tended to look at me as a teacher. But they all came to understand my goal of trying to learn their work and opinions and were willing to help me achieve that goal. On my side, I understood their curiosity about life in the US and their impulse to compare journalism and society in China with the US, and I did my best to satisfy them.

Modifying Research Design

Since fieldwork in natural settings does not have a well controlled environment, there are always unexpected situations, new conditions and emerging issues that the

researcher needs to accommodate. Adapting to new situations is a common part of field research (Berkowitz, 1989; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001)

My initial plan was to do research only with Paper A. But Ms. L strongly suggested me to go into Paper B and later my experience in the field compelled me to reach out to Paper C and D. In fact, I did not really feel the need to gain access to Paper C and D until about halfway through my field research. Thus, the scope of my research expanded substantially during the course of my fieldwork.

The way I conducted interviews with journalists also went through some changes. The first time I sat down with a reporter for the express purpose of interviewing, I felt a bit unsure about what to do. It somehow occurred to me that I should show him my IRB-approved questions as proof that I was not going to do him any harm, so I showed him the list and throughout the interview he looked at the questions and tried to answer them one after another. There were times when I wanted to ask other things, but he was so keenly adhering to the list that I got few opportunities to pose expanded or different questions. I realized that going by the list was a bad idea since it could ruin the conversation and actually prevent me from getting information. Also, many of my initial pre-formed questions were general and abstract in nature, and did not work well to generate meaningful, interesting data. So after this mistake, I did not share the list again. I eventually developed a new list of questions that worked better in the field. These questions incorporated some of the language journalists typically used, including terms, concepts and expressions they used to assign meaning to their work. They also address some common issues, trends and patterned practices that I noticed in the field and deemed important in understanding the occupational culture. Adopting the journalists' own language and working experience, these questions made better sense to the journalists and allowed them to express their views more thoroughly during the actual interviews. The basic repertoire of questions I ultimately decided on was as follows (translated from Chinese):

- What kind of values do you uphold as a journalist?
- What kind of ideals or achievement do you try to attain?
- What do you think a journalist is?
- What is the story of which you are proudest, that gives you the most sense of achievement?
- Do you think your income is compatible with what you give? Do you think being a journalist is worth it?
- Do you often encounter story bans?
- Do you practice undercover reporting or overt reporting more frequently?
- How has the Internet influenced your work as a journalist?
- Are you becoming more and more disappointed toward the society and country?

The actual interviews were not limited to these questions, however. My goal for each interview was to cover all of them but also to have a fruitful exchange. The order of my questions varied from interview to interview, but I basically phrased the questions in more or less the same way. I wrote them down on the last page of my notebook for only myself to see.

Triangulation and Reliability

Lincoln & Guba (1985) propose a set of standards for the trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. For the study to be credible, the researcher may triangulate through use of different methods, as well as additional researchers and source. Other measures include, letting community members check interpretations, engaging in the field for as long as possible, acquiring as much data as possible, and reconciling findings with other records. For the study to be transferable, the researcher should document in detail all procedures, so that later researchers may assess the findings and their applicability in other cases. An “audit” of

study methods and data afterwards may be used to check dependability and reconfirm results.

Other scholars emphasize the need for the researcher to be reflexive about his/her role in the entire process of research—including fieldwork, data analysis and interpretation. Researchers need to be clear about their stance and status in the field and how those factors may influence findings. Researchers should document every methodological decision made in the field, reasons for those decisions and thoughts about how the choices may affect the results. Researchers must leave enough of a trail for other researchers to judge the credibility of the work, and possibly repeat the procedures, if not the results (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001; Schensul et al. 1995).

DeWalt & DeWalt (2001) say that being reflective is the means, not the end. The goal is still to achieve as objective and accurate understanding of human culture as possible, to make sense of the empirical world. They caution that reflexivity does not mean indulging in "individual post-modern musings." In this spirit, I tried to be reflexive about my presence and the impact I might have on the field and subjects of study, but with the overarching objective of trying to understand and explain the culture I am studying.

Besides documenting methodology in detail in my fieldnotes and trying to be non-indulgently reflexive, I also used multiple sources to triangulate findings. I corroborated reporters' accounts about their reporting experiences with published stories whenever possible, obtaining those stories from the papers' online digital databases or through Internet searches. When possible, I verified facts about the news organizations through written documents and prior literature. I followed up stories—sometimes quasi-legends—of past events regarding certain people or organizations by seeking other accounts from different people, and overlay the parts from different sources.

At the same time, I was aware that my role as a researcher had some impact on the way people interacted with me and the information they provided. In order to get the

most authentic information possible, I approached people with a modest attitude, listened to them attentively to show my sincerity of learning from them, and always tried to verify information as much as possible. Despite these efforts, I acknowledge that people's view and perception about me would more or less influence their answers.

Ethical Issues

The ethics of fieldwork demand that I respect subjects' privacy and protect confidentiality, not share opinions nor disclose identities without permission, practice conscience and common sense, and overall do no harm (Christians, 2005; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

As I have mentioned before, in the field, I was always open about my intentions and identity: Everyone knew I was a doctoral student at a U.S. university conducting research for my dissertation. Prior to talking with anyone in the field, I always told the person that his or her name and organization would not be disclosed. For taped interviews, I also promised never to release the audio file. I never shared contents of my notebook, computer or recorder with anyone else, and I am the only person who knows the real names and organizational affiliations of the people mentioned in this study.

My priority is to protect the identity of informants. Real names of people and organizations are never mentioned in my handwritten fieldnotes and typed notes. I use only code names and tags. In my final report of findings, I also obscure certain details of organizations and personal experiences to further protect individual's identities. These sorts of guidelines were designed to prevent possible harm to my informants, for instance, through connecting them with controversial or sensitive comments, but in the absence of potential for harm, I nevertheless am keeping my promise to them.

The Insider-Outsider Dilemma

Finally, I want to briefly address my peculiar situation of being both an insider and outsider at the same time. As far as my origins are concerned, I am an insider,

because I was born and raised in Kunming and graduated from a local high school. My parents worked their entire careers in Kunming and still live there. But in many ways, the city and I have become strangers to each other. I left Kunming at age 19 to attend college in Beijing and have not permanently resided in the city since. Once I graduated from college, I found work in Beijing, and then I came to the U.S. for graduate study. Prior to my fieldwork, I've only spent vacations in Kunming, from a few days to a few months at a time. During my years away, Kunming, like cities throughout China, has been transformed: old streets and buildings torn down, roads rerouted and highways built, new territories developed, and more. The city is now clogged with private cars. While doing my fieldwork, I found it challenging to navigate through what I once considered my hometown. I got on the wrong bus several times, and often had to call a cab to get to home because I just did not know what else to do. I am even less an insider to the newspaper industry in Kunming, having not worked a day there before this fieldwork. My journalism experience in Beijing helped me take on assignments at these local papers, but I was facing very different news organizations and different generations of journalists. So regarding my field sites, I was very much an outsider.

Language posed another issue—not that I have forgotten my Chinese, but the Chinese language, like everything in China, is changing fast, largely due to the flourishing of Internet lingo. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I found myself constantly asking my coworkers about meanings of terms, although once I started to use weibo I was picking up new jargons on my own. I also have trouble speaking the local dialect, even though I can understand people with no problem, since for 16 years I only spoke it with my family and close friends during phone calls and short visits. For this research, I spoke Mandarin (the national or "common" tongue) when talking with journalists in the field because I could not get myself to use the local dialect as my working language. In fact, Mandarin was often preferable, since many reporters and editors are not from Yunnan, and therefore Mandarin is their working language as well. Those from Yunnan usually

speak the local dialect among themselves but Mandarin is spoken between people from different regions and during group meetings. Occasionally some people questioned why I was not speaking the dialect despite being a native. I told them I had not lived in Kunming for more than a decade and was now used to speaking Mandarin, and the matter would just go away.

I think my connection with the town earned me extra friendliness points, as people were glad to know that I was a Kunming native. At the same time, some seemed wary of my overseas background and would reconfirm that I was writing a dissertation instead of, say articles for foreign mass media, before they would tell me something. Others uttered regrets like “why did I tell you that” or “I was not supposed to say that to someone from overseas” after saying something they deemed “sensitive.” It is also likely that people withheld certain information altogether.

In short, while the insider/outsider situation did not seem to be a huge issue, when it did come up, it brought both advantages and disadvantages.

CHAPTER 5 AN OVERVIEW OF KUNMING NEWSROOMS

This chapter provides an overview of life in the Kunming newsrooms I visited, as a prelude to more in-depth analysis of the occupational culture which follows in subsequent chapters. My objective here is to describe aspects of journalists' mundane, routine activities related to their work to create an overall portrait of the workplace.

Like many newsrooms around the world, the ones at Kunming's local papers operate long hours. At the metro papers, a typical day starts at around 9 a.m., when reporters are required to report to the newsroom—or have notified their supervisors as to their whereabouts, such as doing an interview or on a reporting trip. Normally, the newsroom is rather quiet before noon, with no more than half the reporters sitting at their computers, some trying to figure out what story to work on. The place becomes abuzz in the afternoon, when people return from reporting to write stories and editors start their shifts.

Most editors come to work at 3 p.m. and usually do not get off until past midnight. Working to 3 a.m. the next morning is commonplace. Page editors will have a budget meeting close to 5 p.m. to share their current story lists. Night is their busiest time, when they have just a few hours to edit stories, decide on graphics and put the final pages together. Everything is processed electronically: reporters submit stories through an intranet, and editors fetch stories from the computer data base, edit them and send them over to designers. By the time the last light is turned off in the newsroom, it often is just a couple of hours before the lights will be turned on again for the new day.

Reporters at these papers are predominantly members of the generation born in the decade or so after 1980. Supervisors and executives are mostly older, born in the 1970s or 1960s. For example, at Paper A, among 16 reporters I worked or talked with for this project, just two were born before 1980; while among the 12 supervisors and

executives, only three were born after 1980. At Paper B, only one out of 19 reporters was born before 1980, while two out of five supervisors and executives were born after 1980.

Finding and Covering News Stories: Tipsters, BBS and eBikes

Reporters at Kunming's metro papers mainly rely on calls to a telephone "hotline" and leads from the Internet to find news stories. A group of "news tipsters" in Kunming traverse the city every day trying to find stories in the streets and typically calling all four metro papers with the same tips. If a tip results in a published story, the tipster will receive about 50 yuan (about US $8), and some people manage to make a living this way. The metro papers rely heavily on this channel, which seldom delivers exclusives: all four papers end up running some of the same stories on most days.

One quiet Friday morning, for instance, a tipster called the newsroom at Paper A to report that some vendors were selling uncertified cosmic contacts—contact lens with bright colors for the purpose of changing eye colors—at a cartoon art festival. A reporter who went to the festival had to call the tipster again to find out exactly where the sellers could be found among hundreds of booths in a huge exhibition hall. She found a couple of the offenders and wrote a story about it that day for the next day's paper (August 19).

Reporters know some tipsters well enough to decide how trustworthy their tips might be. A reporter from Paper B sent to cover a traffic accident based on a lead from a frequent tipster called the individual for more information, only to learn the scene of the accident had been cleaned up and there was no point in going to the site anymore. This reporter was a bit let down and said this tipster often provided exaggerated clues (October 10, I). Another reporter from Paper C, on the other hand, has formed a rather solid working relationship with at least one tipster over the years. Once when I was accompanying this reporter outside his newspaper, his regular tipster phoned about a car collision right in front of the newspaper building, and the scene was still there when we

got back to the building. The tipster was there, too, and the reporter introduced him to me. I asked the tipster why the crashed cars were still blocking the way, and he said the police had come, but could not move the vehicles (September 23, I)—it seemed like he was doing some reporting as well. A few days later, when I was about to go out observing the same reporter, there was the tipster again, talking with the reporter in front of the newspaper building.

Besides these usual callers, it seems few other people call into news hotlines. Reporters and their supervisors say hotline calls have declined dramatically in recent years, partly because people are getting used to posting news tips on online bulletin boards or via social media. Consequently, reporters' daily routine also includes searching through popular BBS sites and weibo postings for news stories.

One reporter at Paper B, who says the first thing he does at work every day is check BBS and weibo, saw a BBS message about a local road being blocked in both directions, the reasons unclear. He immediately told his supervisor, who asked to see the post, so the reporter sent a link through their internal online chat system. The supervisor read it and said: "The road is blocked for repairing another road next to it," meaning this was normal road construction. No story there (August 30). A reporter from Paper A once saw a BBS posting about an official in a rural town in Yunnan offering to sell government positions, which did yield a story. The reporter contacted the whistleblower, traveled to the town, and ended up doing an investigative piece (September 13).

Upon receiving an assignment, reporters need to figure out how to get to the site of news. The local papers have vehicles for this purpose and reporters can fetch a driver with a vehicle dispatch slip signed by their supervisor. But the number of vehicles available is limited, more so at some papers than others. At times reporters with the proper authorization slip will find the drivers' room empty and all drivers and vehicles out on assignment. So reporters sometimes use other methods, especially if they are not going far. Many reporters own the sort of battery powered bicycles that are ubiquitous in

Kunming. They look very much like motorcycles but do not burn gas, and are lightweight, flexible, faster and more powerful than a person-powered bicycle and certainly much more affordable than a car.

I took one rather nerve-wracking ride with a photographer on the back of his electronic bike. We dodged heavy traffic, sometimes against the traffic flow, and had what seemed to me numerous close calls with other e-bikes, conventional bicycles and motor vehicles. At one near-collision with a cyclist in an intersection, I could not help but scream. None of us were wearing a helmet (August 19).

Another time, I accompanied a reporter on his motorcycle to cover a story at a hospital—he said it was faster than taking a newsroom vehicle and he was trying to catch some hospital officials before their lunch break. Along the way, he ran through a red light, rode in the bus lane, and made prohibited left turns, but at least we were wearing helmets. The whole time, the reporter kept his feet off the motorcycle footrest, almost touching the ground—he had come up with this technique after having an accident while riding to a story on the supposition that it would help him stop in case of emergency (September 26, I).

Reporters seldom take taxis to cover news since only pre-approved fares may be reimbursed. Many reporters own cars but only drive them to and from work since they will not get reimbursed for mileage or fuel used on stories. Occasionally reporters on the job ride regular bicycles or take buses.

General Assignment vs. Beat Reporters

Reporters in the newsroom generally fall into two groups: those on general assignment, called “hotline reporters” or “societal reporters,” and those covering regular beats. Hotline reporters responding to phone tips typically cover car accidents, construction site accidents, migrant worker protests, and sometimes individual

altercations—stories out in the streets involving common folks. Beat reporters, on the other hand, mostly cover stories related to government agencies and officials.

Being a hotline reporter is where most new reporters start honing basic reporting and writing skills. Gradually, some hotline reporters develop strong connections with sources in certain areas and become beat reporters, covering government, law enforcement, education, health, or other areas. Their leads now come mostly from news releases, official websites, or notification from spokespersons, and they often attend government meetings and news conferences. The logistics of work may be easier, but now they face the challenge of extracting relevant stories from the bureaucracy and obtaining information from officials who may be hard to reach or reluctant to speak to the press. They may find it difficult to establish useful relations with sources. Most beat reporters also strive to make news more relevant to readers by doing additional investigation into the real impact of policies on people's lives.

A former police beat reporter who is now a supervisor explained how she got to know key sources and earn their trust. It took her quite a while to get to know people in the police department through other reporters or friends of friends. She then spent a lot of time visiting officials in their offices, having meals with them and participating in social events with police and their staff. Without such relations, she said, the sources would not have answered her questions and certainly would not get in touch to volunteer information (September 22, I).

General assignment reporters sometimes encounter adventure, but the work is hard and the challenges not always pleasant. To give just one example, a reporter covering flooding after a thunderstorm arrived at a badly flooded intersection by newspaper car, got out to take some pictures, and suddenly found one foot sinking into the mud along the shoulder of the road. When he pulled out his foot, his shoe was engulfed. He recalled ending up with both shoes waterlogged the last time he had been on

such a story. “Being a general assignment reporter is the hardest, and we give the most,” he said (September 23).

The stories themselves can pose emotional challenges, such as when a truck transporting soil and sand from construction sites ran over an electronic bike. These heavy trucks have become the deadliest killers on Kunming’s roads, since the drivers make money based on how much volume they can transport in a limited time. They often rampage through the city, despite their heavy loads. A young reporter sent to the scene and posted a photo on his weibo showing a dead body lying in the street, followed a few minutes later by his message of discomfort: “I want to throw up now. Any suggestions, anybody?” About 40 minutes later, he posted more photos, including a closer view of the dead body, and warned: “One of them is bloody, and it is advised that people with a small stomach not look. I have vomited many times upon seeing it, anyway.” Another 20 minutes later, he posted again: “I am going downstairs to buy a beer. Hopefully it will relieve my discomfort.”

Some reporters are not as queasy about unpleasant scenes, such as a woman reporter who admitted she once gobbled down crackers at a bloody murder scene because she was too hungry. An accompanying colleague, however, was shocked that she could eat near a foul smelling, decomposing body (October 19, III). A beat reporter who has covered fires for the last two years said dead bodies no longer prompt him to cover his nose and mouth. “Now I don’t feel much [upon seeing dead bodies],” he said (September 1).

Some challenges are associated with the irregular hours journalists keep. One photographer said he has chronic stomach aches whenever he is hungry, a problem he attributes to reporting days when he seldom ate on time. “When I was over-starved, my stomach hurt. So I would smoke a cigarette, which numbed [the pain] a little bit,” he says. “Being a reporter is laborious, exhausting and risky. Now that I am no longer a hotline reporter, I can finally have dinner at home” (October 16).

Getting Paid

Although working tough and challenging jobs, reporters' incomes are rather moderate. They get monthly paychecks, with the amount on the paychecks determined by both quantity and quality of stories they contribute, although different newspapers use different schemes to calculate pay.

At Paper A, for instance, supervisors used to assign a numeral score to each story their subordinate reporters wrote in the past month based on the size and the quality of the story. Typical scores may be 200, 500, or 1000, corresponding to the amount of money, in yuan, that a story is deemed to be worth. That is to say, a story with a score of 500 would be paid 500 yuan. By the time I finished my fieldwork, Paper A was modifying its evaluation and payment policies. Paper B used a different, more sophisticated system. Supervisors assigned each story a letter grade (A, B, C, D), with a formula that incorporates factors such as exclusive or in-depth story used to convert the letters to a numerical value, which together with another measure indicating the size of the story produced the amount of money the story was worth. Both newspapers required reporters to turn out work amounting to at least 1,500 yuan per month—the minimum performance requirement. Failing to meet this requirement results in warning and if bad performance persist, firing.

On one payday at Paper A, a supervisor commented to an under-performing reporter who was getting about 1000 yuan for the month: "Is that enough for travel expenses for you and your girlfriend?" It was close to the National Day holiday, when everybody would get a whole week off. Another reporter got 4000 yuan, which was fairly good (September 27).

Reporters' incomes may vary drastically from month to month, ranging from less than 2,000 yuan to more than 8,000 yuan, while that of the supervisors and executives is more stable, usually around 5,000 yuan. Higher ranked executives make more. Staff also receive benefits, such as health insurance and housing subsidies, although the details vary

from newspaper to newspaper and from individual to individual. Generally speaking, however, compensation for newsworkers in Kunming is lower than that for other white-collar workers. To make some extra cash, moonlighting is not uncommon among journalists. For example, some reporters write longer versions of stories they covered and sell them to magazines not affiliated with their own news organization.

A shadier, but openly acknowledged, source of additional income for reporters is the so called “red envelope” commonly handed to those covering press conferences, product promotions, business opening and other publicity occasions. Each red envelope usually holds a few hundred yuan in cash, the assumption being that favorable stories will result. In the past, red envelopes have been viewed as a form of rampant corruption among Chinese journalists (Zha, 1995). But in Kunming during my fieldwork, the issue rarely came up, and if it did was treated as routine. One veteran journalist mentioned to me that beat reporters sometimes get some red envelopes (October 21, II), but others only addressed the question if asked. One executive told me he did not care whether reporters receive red envelops or not, as long as they produce good, relevant stories (October 18, II). On the other hand, reporters are not allowed to take outright bribes from sources—defined as larger amounts of cash given secretly in exchange for cover-up or favorable coverage.

It needs to be noted, however, that the red envelope issue not surfacing that much during my fieldwork should not be taken as an indication that the practice has become obsolete. It might well be that journalists in my study were not willing to tell a researcher from the US too much about this kind of unethical practice or they had taken it for granted and did not bother to mention. Besides red envelopes, journalists are also likely to receive gifts from sources who are pleased with positive coverage.

Cigarettes, Air and Food

When I worked in the Beijing Bureau of the South China Morning Post a few years ago, our newsroom was nonsmoking and our bureau chief took his cigarette break regularly outside the newsroom. This is not the case at the local papers I visited, however, where it is hard to find a male staff worker who does NOT smoke right in the newsroom. Men smoke everywhere: at their desks, during meetings, while writing stories. It is easy to tell which computers belong to men: the ones with keyboards covered with ashes. There is no such thing as cigarette break because people who wish to smoke may do it anytime, anywhere. Whenever two or more men are in the same room, one or another will hand out cigarettes to male colleagues—an expected ritual of greeting and showing respect. In one newsroom where I worked, I happened to have a chain smoker sitting in the adjoining cubicle. He smoked incessantly for hours, which from day one I found quite horrid. I did not protest because smoking in the newsroom is commonplace (July 20). I finally asked a group of heavy-smoking supervisors why they did not care about their health, and they said they had gotten used to smoking. One supervisor said if China had banned smoking in public, he would not smoke so much. Right away, another argued that if China ever banned smoking in public, Yunnan's economy would collapse—Yunnan has China's biggest tobacco company with an annual profit over 30 billion yuan (about US$4.6 billion). Another joked that their smoking contributed a lot to the GDP of Yunnan (August 22).

At another paper, a supervisor who had been a reporter for a few years, said he would prefer a designated smoking room, but no regulation requires that. Even if there was a ban on smoking in the office it could never be enforced, he said, because the bosses smoke in their offices: "The publisher of the newspaper smokes in his room, too." He added that some reporters developed smoking habits to deal with deadline pressure, and recalled his own experience of that: "After a day's reporting, what I wanted to do most

was to sleep. But I couldn't. I still had to write the article. But after a few cigarettes, I felt better" (July 28).

In short, among the men of the newsroom, there seems to be a sense of collective denial: They all know smoking is unhealthy, but it is a vice they wholeheartedly share.

What about women in the newsroom? I did not see a single woman smoke in the newsrooms I visited. In this case, the gender give-away is a humidifier on the desk, the streams of mist from these small portable devices mingling with the tobacco smoke floating in the newsroom air (July 25). Women told me they used humidifiers simply for humidifying, because they found the newsroom too dry and stuffy (July 28). Both newsrooms I worked in occupy a huge warehouse-style space covering an entire floor of a building. Cubicles and dividers demarcate different sections and individual desks, and windows are invariably closed. No wonder the women are starved for better air, even as the men seem mindless of the smoke-laden oppression.

Some reporters leave the building at lunchtime to eat at nearby restaurants, usually in groups. Many places to eat are within a short walk, and the cost of eating out is low—a fairly satisfying lunch can be had for less than US $5. Other reporters will order take-out from all kinds of menus posted on the office walls and eat lunch at their desks. Sometimes reporters staying in the newsroom chip in to order food to share. I only saw a couple of examples of reporters bringing their own lunch. Unless a reporter is too busy to take a break, lunch commonly becomes an important forum for socializing.

One day, a reporter and I came back to the newsroom just in time to join a group of reporters and supervisors lunching around a round table. They ordered a big pot of gan guo ji, steamed and stir-fried chicken with chili peppers, lotus roots, mushrooms, peanuts and other stuff, plus a big bowl of vegetable soup—splitting the cost of about 100 yuan total. They had plenty and invited us to sit down, so we squeezed in at the already crowded table, tore an empty foam box into two as our plates, and found some chopsticks from a reporter's desk drawer.

While eating, people chatted randomly. They started to gossip about who liked whom in the newsroom. A supervisor, a man, started to tell about an ex-girlfriend, while another supervisor, a woman, gave running commentary like a talk show host. Everyone else was rapt with attention as they finished the food. I helped clean up—having been told it was a rule that whoever finished last clears the table (October 10).

Dinners out are common. I once accompanied a group of editors to grab a meal while we were busy producing multi-page special coverage on the downfall of Muammar Gaddafi. We went to a nearby restaurant often patronized when time is short. The place provides steamed, ready-to-eat dishes, and guests can simply take whatever they want from the display area to a dining table. “It’s quick here. No need to wait,” one editor said (August 22).

Under other circumstances, dining out becomes an after-work social gathering. One evening, I joined about 20 something journalists from one paper for a feast that featured lots of liquor, lots of cigarettes, and some dirty jokes. The actual eating seemed secondary. A photographer passed his iPhone around the table to show caricatures of his colleagues he had made using an app, producing much laughter as well as a mini-contest to identify the people in the pictures. The conversations were a mix of jocular and serious, including some actual work discussion. Everybody clearly was having a great time (July 19).

Newsworkers also will gather socially to go to karaoke clubs, where a group gets a room of its own and people sing their lungs out, while consuming large amounts of beer until well past midnight. Newspapers also organize New Year celebrations with variety shows at which staffers of some talent entertain their co-workers by performances such as singing, dancing and acting in mini plays. Good or bad, these performances are invariably enjoyable and provide journalists with much-needed opportunities to put work aside.

CHAPTER 6 THE SUBSTANCE OF KUNMING'S JOURNALISM CULTURE

This chapter explores the meanings Kunming journalists draw from and attribute to their work in terms of the substance of journalism culture, which encompasses, as discussed earlier, journalists' understandings of who they are, their definitions of the nature of their job, and their shared values, ideals and standards, including their notions of what counts as success. The chapter presents what journalists divulged about cognitions, perceptions, evaluations, opinions, and other thoughts concerning their work. Substance is differentiated from the other main dimension of journalism culture I address, form, which is comprised of actual practices and behaviors, to be covered in the next chapter. The relationship between substance and the form is analogous to that between the signified (the meaning) and the signifier (the material form expressing the meaning). This chapter, therefore, focuses on what journalists think, whereas the next chapter focuses on what journalists do to materialize what they think.

The following sections examine three aspects of how journalists in Kunming perceive the meaning of their work: job definition (i.e. how they define their job as journalists), collective identity (i.e. what kind of people they think they are), and shared values, beliefs and ideals (i.e. what they aspire to achieve, consider as good journalism and count as success).

Job Definition

I asked informants to characterize their jobs starting with the question: "What do you think a journalist is?" They defined their work roles in various ways.

"Being a journalist is just a job" was a frequent comment, but often followed immediately with qualifications. Journalists commonly would add observations about the public nature of their work, even calling it a "public occupation." A supervisor said being a journalist is just a job, albeit a special one, because of its public facet. "It is an

occupation that requires practitioners to give more, but gain less," he said (October 11, I). A veteran journalist saw journalists as having no specific power other than the right to speak to the public because of their public platform, the media (October 8, I). Another supervisor stated, "Being a journalist is just a job, but shoulders more responsibility… The most important responsibility for journalists is to maintain justice, fairness and social advance" (October 18, I). For an investigative reporter, "Journalism is a public occupation. It is also a means of making a living, but not anybody can take it as a means of making a living. You need to have righteousness and conscience. You speak on behalf of the public and record social transitions, not representing any individual. Your accounts are open to the public, not to be kept private" (October 25).

"Record-taker" is another frequently mentioned definition. This is not surprising, given that the Chinese word for journalist, *ji zhe*, literally means "the one who records." A reporter with a journalism degree said his journalism professors taught that a journalist is a recorder of society. "You are supposed to record the changes of society, no matter whether they are good or bad changes, or changes not matching your own values. You are an objective recorder" (September 23, II). A young reporter likewise said journalists must fairly and truthfully record history, but he also acknowledged, "The media have the power to evoke public outcry. What happens next is out of the control of journalists" (October 8, II).

Some journalists defined their job as more than recording, however. Another veteran said that even if textbooks say a journalist is the recorder of an era, he'd rather regard journalists as a monitor of public power, who through such monitoring further advances historical progress (September 27, I). An investigative journalist who shares this view said journalists should "work relentlessly to facilitate social progress, and take on some social responsibility." She clarified what she meant by social responsibility as helping those in need. For instance, she herself has been running a project through her

newspaper soliciting donations to help students in poverty through their first year of college (September 26, II).

For other journalists, however, shouldering social responsibility is asking too much. Their rationale usually rests not on the merits of such an approach, but on its feasibility—or lack thereof. A young reporter said, "Journalist is just an occupation, not much different from cook or janitor. Someone told me not to think too highly of yourself nor assign yourself too much responsibility…because there is not much you can do" (September 27, II). Several people used the metaphor of a gun, telling me social expectations could turn journalism into a weapon or tool that anybody can use for their own needs. "The main function of journalists is not to help migrant workers to ask for back pay, but to reveal truth," said a photojournalist. "It is the country's political system that makes journalists a gun. [Under such a system], journalists cannot do their job of monitoring power." But immediately, he added, "If journalists were used by common people to deal with corrupt officials, I would totally approve."

This photographer related a story to illustrate his willingness to help common people. Some tobacco farmers had tipped of his newspaper that a state-own cigarette company was cheating farmers by paying artificially low prices for leaf tobacco and later selling for much more to others, making millions in illegal profits. "I went to cover the story at the factory's collecting station for tobacco leaves and was pushed out by workers there," he recalled. "Then tobacco farmers formed a human ladder for me to climb up to see where the leaves were stored, and I took photos of workers trying to cover those leaves in a hurry… Do something for the common people, I do it with all my heart." However, the story and photos were not published because provincial propaganda authorities nixed it, saying publicity would disturb the stability of the local tobacco market, and the tobacco industry is the backbone of Yunnan's economy (October 16).

A veteran journalist who is now a supervisor says he tells young colleagues that, "Journalists are everything, but also nothing. Common people may kneel down in front of

journalists, cry to them and place hopes upon them. At that moment, journalists are gods, not human, surpassing all government agencies. But the problem is the government. As the Party's newspaper, can we always point the spearhead at the government? A lot of times journalists do not know what to do and we are nothing" (September 22, II).

In the end, no single definition of the journalist emerges, and the definition keeps changing even for the same individual, as in the case of an investigative journalist who related how his own understandings evolved. "At the beginning, I thought journalists are 'kings without crowns'," he said, citing a common phrase incorporating the presumed power of journalism. "Later, I felt journalists should record the society and stand up for justice. After that, I felt journalists are busy making a living. Now I think journalists are the ones who record society, and they also are migrant workers running around for a living, and they also have a regular job." He concluded: "Journalists are like phantoms—they have all kinds of roles" (October 12, II).

Journalists may not agree upon what a journalist is, but are more ready to agree what a journalist is NOT. Most interviewed for this study reject the idealized notion of journalists as kings without crowns—implying a kind of nobility along with the ability to accomplish the impossible, and, a saying one executive called "pretty much empty talk." He added, though: "But the tool of media is very important. Journalists hold this tool in their hands and have the right to speak. It is also not exaggerating to say journalists are the fourth estate, in terms of how they create trouble for the government." At the same time, he maintained: "Journalist actually is just a regular occupation, like lawyers and doctors, serving the society through providing useful information. They shouldn't think too highly of themselves" (October 12, I).

One young reporter described journalists as a disadvantaged group with no legal protection. Even if they have the right to cover news, she said, "who offers you the right to cover news? There is no legal boundary either. To say that journalists are kings

without crowns is probably talking about the Republic of China era. It is not the case now" (October 21, I).

Collective Identity

Journalists interviewed for this project commonly used the same analogy when asked how they see themselves in society and most agree that they are *da gong de*, or contract workers. They have even invented a label for themselves: "migrant workers of words" (*wenzi mingong*) or "migrant workers of news" (*xinwen mingong*).

In China, the term contract worker (*da gong de*)—used in contrast with permanent worker—highlights the difference between working outside versus within the establishment. Contract workers are hired on temporary basis, with contracts, usually renewable, lasting one to five or more years, and may be fired at any time. Their benefits are not government subsidized and their salary is based mainly on piecework—in the case of reporters, on the amount and quality of articles, photographs, or other items they finish that see publication. Permanent workers, on the other hand, are employees of the state-run system, typically with government subsidized health benefits, pension plans and housing, and sometimes lifetime tenure. Up to the reform period, all media employees (indeed, most non-agricultural workers generally) were on the state payroll. The contract system began to emerge in journalism about ten years ago, producing the co-existence of secure and contract forms of employment in news organizations, especially at official media outlets. There is a clear-cut distinction between the two statuses. A perhaps apocryphal story has it that one year, when a Party newspaper in Kunming distributed bonuses of salted fish to its staff for the Chinese Lunar New Year, within-system workers got a whole fish while outside-system ones receive only a half (October 21, II).

Such a difference between within and without is largely a result of China's transition from a centrally planned economy to a market orientation. The permanent worker is a legacy of China's socialist era, when all urban employees, including media

workers, were considered as hired by the government and entitled to all kinds of benefits provided by the state, from salary, health care, childcare, schooling, and retirement to even funeral services. The market reforms in all sectors have changed human resource policies, and permanent hires—what used to be called the "iron rice bowl" *or tiefanwan* when salaries were uniformly low—is being phased out across industries and replaced by a contract arrangement. Among news media, the market-oriented metro papers mostly depend on contract workers.

At Kunming's metro papers, this includes the top executives. The very few permanent newsworkers are mostly with Party organs, and their numbers are diminishing as older workers retire and permanent positions diminish. Throughout my fieldwork at metro papers, in fact, I only encountered one permanent worker, who joined a Party-affiliated metro paper as a reporter more than ten years earlier. As far as I know, he is also the only one among the journalists I talked to who has a monthly base salary not related to the actual amount of work he accomplishes and lives in an apartment provided by his news organization. Contract journalists have to purchase commercial housing on their own.

Thus, journalists likening themselves to migrant workers of words/news arises from their job status: they are hired on temporary basis with no guarantee of long-term employment, no security nor certainty about their livelihoods—perhaps not as tenuous a situation as that of migrant workers who leave their rural villages to seek job in cities, but shaky nonetheless.

The analogy also reflects journalists' sense of their social status: many feel they are despised by the establishment, similar to migrant workers being scorned by the rich and powerful—for reasons that are both similar and different. Government and Party authorities tend to view contract employees as somehow less legitimate than permanent employees, and that extends to journalists. One news supervisor said this makes interviewing people from government agencies, who tend to be permanent civil servants,

all the harder because "they look down upon journalists, knowing you are hired by contract." He added that civil servants consider *Yunnan Daily*, which is the provincial Party organ, the mainstream paper, while metro papers like his are non-establishment and thus of lower standing (September 22, II).

A third reason journalists cite for drawing the analogy with migrant workers is their relatively low incomes that most consider far less than their hard work really deserves—as with migrant workers, who often do the toughest physical labor for little reward. Journalists are not shy about this complaint. At one editorial meeting, an editor told his Editor-in-Chief that the newspaper's housing subsidy of 100 yuan (about US $15) per month to help people afford housing was too low, and lower than that of other local news organizations. "You cannot even buy one square meter after saving for several years. What's the point?" he said (August 17).

A supervisor at another paper, who told me, "I consider myself a migrant worker of words," openly worried about his income. "I often think, what should I do when I am old? The housing subsidy every month is 120 yuan, and the mortgage for my house is 2,600 yuan per month. A friend of mine has a housing subsidy of 1,200 yuan per month." And he bemoaned how he thinks society looks upon his occupation. "Journalists look like kings without crowns, appearing to be shiny, but actually have very low social status. Isn't there a saying? Watch out for fire, burglars and reporters!" (September 14, September 21) Indeed, this is a well known phrase that journalists often use as a self-mocking joke.

A young female reporter who said her monthly income was about 2,000 yuan (about US$300), up from only 1,200 yuan (about US$185) when she first became a reporter, has found finances a main deterrent to staying in the field. "I told my friends [about my income] and none of them believed me," she said. "They said, you're a journalist and you get 1,200 yuan per month? Who are you trying to fool?" This reporter originally was thrilled about becoming a journalist. "I thought journalists were awesome!

On TV, I saw reporters seeking justice for common people, unstoppable everywhere, super sharp!" Now, after a year, she was thinking about quitting. "Being a journalist is hard work, and the compensation is very poor," she said. "The money I make in one month is only enough for me to buy one piece of clothing!" (September 21)

An executive told me that journalists' low incomes are due to the news industry's still-backward mode of production. The biggest costs for newspapers remain paper and printing, and they struggle to turn a profit. He says news organizations would like to provide higher compensation to staff and to retain talent, but they simply don't have enough money (September 18).

Shared Beliefs, Ideals and Values

Even if they liken themselves to the lowliest laborers and reject the "kings without crowns" characterization, the journalists still have high aspirations and often lofty ideals about what counts as good, meaningful journalism.

Making a Difference

One commonly expressed desire is to make a difference through news coverage. A web editor who used to be a reporter, for example, said journalists all want to see some results from their work. "If [we] don't think this way, there is no meaning to being a journalist," he said (September 16). A supervisor who was a reporter for many years expressed hope that news stories can make a difference and redress injustice. "I hope my own relatives, my parents won't be treated unfairly when something [bad] happens," he said (September 21).

Among the values journalists say they have in mind in their desire to prompt changes are fairness, justice, social and economic development, freedom and democracy, and the search for truth (October 19, I; October 11, II). One reporter spoke of working toward a society where people from different social strata can all find ways to make a living and will receive fair treatment and rewards, saying this hope compels him to

"condemn unfair occurrences" (September 16). An executive who is also a veteran reporter listed "democratization of politics, marketization of the economy, and diversification of culture" as "the standards of a good society, good country." He added that the roots of evils in China's society always trace back to the political system, saying, "If the political system is the most important factor, then does it not mean that we should change it?" (September 18).

On the other hand, many of my journalist informants said they have come to realize that making a difference or promoting fundamental social change are no easy tasks, so they have tamed their aspirations accordingly, aiming for small, attainable changes rather than big, sweeping ones. A supervisor who was previously a reporter for several years, acknowledging that there are a lot of things journalists cannot change, said she would "try my best," adding, "If I can change the fate of a couple of people, then that is worth it." (September 22, I) A reporter with similar views said: "Journalists should help disadvantaged groups, and should insist on revealing the truth. China's media environment, everybody knows it quite well. [We] might not be able to achieve the goals, but [we] need to try our best" (September 26, II). Another reporter said that although media's power is limited, journalists still have motivation to produce some changes, and his approach is "do what I am supposed to do" but also seek betterment "little by little." Journalists shouldn't style themselves heroes, in his view: "I do not think too greatly of myself" (September 6). Another reporter said, "Change is too big a word," preferring "improve, and through individual cases, one after another," and added that this is a precondition for greater progress. "Without individual cases, there won't be [change in] the entire society" (October 13).

Monitoring Power

In talking about the kind of journalism they aspire to do, journalists often mention the notion of "monitoring" or *jiandu*, which is akin to the watchdog notion. During the

reform period, the idea that news media should monitor public power was raised by journalism scholars in the 1980s, and the Party in part has welcomed the concept but also imbued it with qualifications. Propaganda officials allow that the mass media have the function of monitoring the behavior of officials and the performance of the Party and government, but at the same time they set various boundaries. These may include requiring pre-publication review of coverage of sensitive topics or even of mentions of names of officials. Also, the monitoring function tends to be more acceptable at the provincial levels and above, while the local press and especially commercial tabloids are more restricted in this regard (Wei, 2006).

Nevertheless, many journalists do try to investigate and publicize matters they view as harmful to the wellbeing of the public, be it official corruption and malfeasance, business fraud, or any instances of the rich and powerful violating the rights of the poor and powerless. Some journalists actively pursue investigative reporting and even aggressive muckraking.

An investigative reporter who has taken the idea of monitoring power to heart his entire career said that, “Journalism should be the conscience of the society” (October 14). Another veteran journalist said the value of the media’s very existence rests on monitoring public power as the only way to “push the society forward” (September 27, I). An executive said journalists who “want to save the society through news coverage,” even if it involves revealing the ugly side, incorporate the most passionate and pure ideals for journalism (October 18, II). A supervisor who as a reporter covered the police beat said journalists cannot be obligated to always cast the authorities in a positive light. In fact, she added, the authorities will not respect journalists who only serve as a “mouthpiece” (September 22, I).

Some of my informants expressed admiration for investigative journalists, saying the nickname of “darkness-revealing journalists” (*jiehei jizhe*) captures the enterprise well.. “Darkness-revealing journalists, monitoring journalists, they are the real

journalists," said a supervisor who used to do investigative reporting himself. China lacks sufficient numbers of such journalists, he said, for obvious reasons: The job entails threat and risk without necessarily bringing high income, especially in this piece-rate era because a single story can take a very long time to report. "That is why in China is it so hard to be a journalist who has the real sense of justice, someone who reveals the darkness, monitors power, and really wants to push for social progress" (September 27, I), he said. In Kunming, hard-core investigative journalists are clearly viewed as being in a league of their own—a minority of icons to be praised but not necessarily emulated.

Helping Those in Need

Most of my informants expressed strong desires to help people in need, something they take as part of their mission not simply out of sympathy. In these journalists' minds, their chief loyalties should rest with the disadvantaged, the powerless, the poor, and some think journalists should extend practical assistance to such individuals and groups when and how they can. In a society experiencing widening gaps between social strata, journalists see helping the disadvantaged as a matter of promoting social justice. One young journalist called helping the disadvantaged a matter of conscience. "Under China's system, many unfair things happen. What media people should do is to uncover these things," she said (September 20). Another reporter said media should help the disadvantaged "because strata at the bottom of the society have no basic rights" (October 8, II).

Some informants maintained that if journalists don't help these people, nobody will. "Journalism is a label. Without this label, I cannot help anyone. I still want to use my profession to help more people," said a reporter (October 25). "They are already powerless. If newspapers don't speak for them, nobody will speak for them," said a supervisor. He also acknowledged that, for market oriented newspapers, being on the side of common folks can help to sell papers, because those are the readers (August 30).

Some journalists think their jobs go further than covering the news. One reporter said simply that journalists should help as many people as possible (September 23, II). Others extend help apart from their regular jobs. “I think I work as a journalist for grass-roots people like myself, for the common folks,” said a veteran woman journalist. “I have been visiting rural villages all these years and have seen how bitter villagers’ lives are.” So besides covering stories, she has helped many villagers find legal assistance to pursue grievances, she said (October 25).

Chinese journalists don’t have to look far to find problems facing the urban poor, migrant workers, and others who encounter hardships and often violations of their rights. It’s not unusual for ordinary people to actively seek help from the press, often by simply walking into a newsroom and telling someone about their problems. Increasingly, people who feel wronged will stage some kind of protest—typically referred to as *nao*, or a “disturbance”—to attract reporters, because chances are news tipsters will see the action and call it in. As for why disadvantaged people so eagerly seek help from journalists and why journalists are receptive, many of my informants agreed the fault lies with China’s political system, under which people without money or power have little recourse.

“In China’s system, the channels of reporting to the government are not very open,” noted an investigative reporter. “If a matter is not publicized, the government would push it aside as much as possible” (September 26, II). Another reporter said avenues for common people to convey requests to authorities are neither smooth nor wide. “When they have no other way to go, the media provide them with a channel that can go around the bureaucracy” (September 23, II).

Others pointed out that legal approaches for common folks to defend their rights often do not work in China, with many laws being empty words that cannot be enforced. “If the law often exists in name only, common people can only resort to the media, because the media have a little bit special power,” said a supervisor. “They can publicize situations where the law is not enforced. Once [things are] publicized, there will be some

public pressure and such pressure definitely can push for solving problems, defending people's rights and seeking justice" (September 27, I). Another reporter said, "China is not like the US, which has a mature legal system. Common people have no means to plea to legal authorities or the government, so they come to the media" (September 27, II).

"For disadvantaged groups, the easiest institution to go to is the media," said a veteran journalist. "Government agencies are very cold to them. When talk to the media, they can release their emotions and feel better" (October 8, I). A supervisor put it this way: "Why do people come to the media? Because they have no other place to go. Coming to the media has the lowest cost: They won't be beaten up, nor locked up. When they come, there will be a cup of tea and someone listening. For some people, just to let it out is good" (October 11, I).

Journalists hope, and so do those who turn to them for help, that making problems known to the general public through publication of news stories will prompt government attention and resolution. Indeed, this sometimes is what happens. But journalists also say that if media coverage helps to solve one person's problem, hundreds more will follow suit. "Somebody blocks the road once [to protest something], the media covers it, and government agencies solve the problem," said a veteran journalist. "Then… too many people try to jump from buildings or block the road—the people have gotten the bad lessons from the media" (September 22, II). Journalists say they are gradually getting tired of these kind of incidents, but still need to cover them, and more or less still sympathize with people's desperation.

Journalists understand, of course, that any influence they have comes from the publicity of their media platform, and that publicity can only do so much. They know they lack any authority to actually dictate anybody's business. One reporter noted that "the media are only a medium, which cannot give people anything directly. What media can do is to send people's requests to places that they themselves cannot reach" (September 23, II). A supervisor who is a strong proponent for social justice and

representing the disadvantaged also acknowledged that media "can never have direct effects, because the media have no executive power." In his view, "The media can only monitor some darkness and evil through revealing the truth, which puts pressure on the ones being monitored. Of course, even with such pressure, attention from the leaders is still needed. Leaders have to say something and give some instructions… That's the situation in China" (September 27, I). A supervisor said becoming a journalist taught him about the existence of evil in some corners of society but didn't give him the ability to eliminate it. "The power in my hand is to expose things under the sun" and inform government agencies, "building a bridge between the government and the common people," he said. "Eventually, you still have to let the authorities handle things" (October 18, I).

Even as a widely shared belief, whether helping those in need is really the job for journalists is up for debate, and a few journalists in my study had second thoughts on the matter. One executive said he used to think news workers should naturally sympathize with the disadvantaged, but not anymore. Instead, he thinks media's job is to reveal truth, and not to help anyone in particular (September 18). A veteran journalist said journalists should do news first, with helping others sometimes an unintended result. He said he does not set out to help people and will cover a story only when there is clear news value (September 26, I). A television journalist said helping is beyond the normal journalists' duty, observing that, "In China, journalists already have gone above and beyond to shoulder functions outside the occupation itself. Journalists get involved in disputes and some disadvantaged groups rely on media as a resource to help them get what they want" (October 12, III). Another reporter said media are viewed as an "all-capable institution," but in fact, "the media are not power agencies, and journalists are rather powerless" (September 27, II).

Objectivity vs. Bias

A majority of the journalists in this study maintained that good journalism should be fair, objective, based upon facts and revealing of truth. “Truth is in short supply in China,” said a veteran journalist. “Seeing truth can even be very [emotionally] moving.” In his view, journalists’ main function should be objective and fair reporting, and having too strong a purpose beyond that is inadvisable, because whether or not the story can make a difference or produce certain results is beyond the control of the reporter (September 18).

An executive said that journalists shouldn’t have an agenda that sets out either “to demonize the rich and powerful” or to “make angels of the disadvantaged.” Journalists should approach stories with balance, he said; “Ideally, if you give party A the chance to speak, then you should give equal chances to party B.” But he acknowledged that in reality, many of his reporters do have preconceived stands, some pro-disadvantaged, some pro-government, and said he respects that, “as long as the facts are right” (October 12, I).

One supervisor emphasized the importance of being rational, non-emotional and cool headed. “Some journalists have formed the habit of thinking whatever the powerless says is right, and that everybody else is trying to dodge their responsibility,” she said. Sources may manipulate reporters who aren’t objective, in her view. “The society will go crazy if journalists are emotional” (September 22, I). An executive said his own expectations of himself are to be an objective and fair citizen, in sufficient control of his emotions that he “does not hate, nor fall in love easily” (October 18, II).

Yet many of my informants feel it is possible to uphold standards of fairness and objectivity while also empathizing with the disadvantaged. One reporter told me that being objective “cannot involve personal feeling” but that not having personal feelings is impossible. “There will be some, more or less. It is okay as long as you don’t deviate from the facts.” But he went on to say that he would always tend to favor the

disadvantaged, adding that he had grown up in a rural area and knew from personal experience that families without money and power need help (October 11, II).

A photojournalist who shot and posted a short video on a personal web account showing city patrol officers beating up street vendors was similarly candid with me about siding with the underdog. The video was reposted many times, as the sight of a vendor's face badly bruised and swollen and the vendor's young child crying amongst the chaotic crowd attracted by the commotion generated sympathy toward the street vendor as well as anger toward the city patrol force. When I asked this photographer if he personally had found the episode upsetting, he responded, "Not really. This is not the cruelest incident of [city patrol] beating people. I am used to it." I asked if he was trying to convey a message with the video, to which he replied, "I didn't want to convey anything in particular, just thinking about how to tell the story clearly. Of course there were personal emotions included." He acknowledged that the video "looks like it is speaking for the victims," and said that was his intent. "Everybody would stand on the side of the victims" (September 28).

Journalists are aware of the contradictions between their professional standards for doing straight, fair, objective reporting and their personal emotions that tend to favor the disadvantaged. Many of them wrestle with themselves over the dilemma of objectivity vs. bias, such as the supervisor who recalled his experience covering a story of a farmer being beaten to death at a local jail after he was detained for illegal felling of trees. The local authorities, attempting to cover up the incident, claimed the victim had died while playing a cat-and-mouse game with other inmates. "I was just trying to reconstruct the facts," this journalist recalled. He said he went to visit the victim's family and saw they lived in poverty. The farmer had cut down trees to make some money to survive. The journalist felt there was nobody else who would speak for the family. "I knew I should be impartial, but emotionally I still favored the family," he said, adding, "Sometimes I feel guilty; I didn't stick to professional standards. An old reporter once

told me that caring for humanity is the journalist's job. I think caring for humanity means sympathizing with the disadvantaged. Being impartial should be a professional standard, but sometimes one can't help but be biased. Sometimes we should be biased, should stand on the side of the disadvantaged….But what on earth should we do? I myself haven't figured that out."

His article about the farmer ended up generating national attention, led to high-level debate on the police detention system, and won this journalist a top honor at his newspaper. He said he was proud of the story, and that covering it changed his attitudes about journalism. Now he thinks objectivity can be overdone and result in bland stories. "Fairness is the foundation. This cannot be changed. But sometimes it's okay to be a bit biased" (September 14).

Not surprisingly, journalists' tendency to side with people in conflict with authorities has been noticed by the authorities. This became clear at a meeting in which an executive briefed editors and supervisors on a speech by a local propaganda official. The official's comments, which the executive read from a printed document, criticized reporters for "always standing with the disadvantaged when covering disputes between the authority and the people, between the rich and poor." It complained that reporters "interview the other side with a stand of favoring the disadvantaged side, and slanted toward the disadvantaged in writing, too." The executive offered some of his own thoughts on this matter as well, saying reporters and editors needed to be more fair and objective in covering disputes. Noting that some staffers had been "playing a lot" with microblog, he said, "It is OK to be more candid and straightforward on that platform, but not in the paper. Under the current situation, no matter how unhappy you are with the Party, it is the Party that gives us everything we have now. It will allow you to do some news, but it won't allow you to stomp upon rationality" (September 13).

Sense of Achievement

Journalists in this study were nearly unanimous in saying their incomes fail to match the efforts they expend in their job and yet most still find their work worthwhile. Despite dissatisfaction over pay and status, despite the fact that many speak of arduous-but-fruitless endeavors, journalists say they like the job for relatively free schedule, fitting their personality, the love of writing, ideals, and the opportunity to write big stories and become famous, improve personal capabilities, or simply get to know the society. Some also offer the cynical-sounding explanation of, "Besides this, I don't know what else I can do" (September 14; October 12, II; October 21, I; October 19, III; October 13; October 11, I; October 8, II; September 28; September 22, I).

Quite a few of my informants include the possibility of "helping others" among reasons they think their hard work is worth it. A young reporter who said he had made 2,400 yuan (less than US$400) the previous month, which was about one-third his monthly income when working in another city, said he had not become a journalist in Kunming for the money. He said opportunities to help people, reveal official corruption and monitor power made the work worthwhile (October 13). An investigative journalist who has taken many risks, and sometimes encountered life-threatening dangers said they are more than balanced by the "many rewards," including the ability to help common people. "I cover the story, it is published, and common folks receive what they deserve, solving many issues," she said. "There is a sense of joy" (October 25). A veteran journalist said he had a sense of achievement when a story helped common people or pushed for some policy change (September 27, I). Another veteran, saying the rewards are more spiritual than material, recalled her most famous articles, which resulted in four fugitives turning themselves in to the police after years on the lam. "Through my news coverage, I could change their lives. The society has four less criminal suspects, which is also good for the society. They [the fugitives] can face the days to come with peace. For

the four families, they have a good start. This makes me feel pleased, feeling I did something meaningful" (October 8, I).

In response to the question about which of their stories gave them the strongest sense of achievement, most journalists I interviewed gave examples related to helping those in need. Among 21 accounts about such stories in my fieldnotes, 14 concern helping those in need, three stress scoops or revealing truth, and four emphasize social or political impact. Following are some examples.

• Along with reporters from two other local newspapers, XW covered the death of a local official, who had been found dead in a local nightclub after excessive drinking with a group of other government officials. This story brought him a strong sense of achievement because it generated attention from media nationwide, prompting provincial authorities to investigate the incident and resulting in a batch of local officials getting sacked (September 27, I).

• YXM learned from a chat with a transportation police officer that in a suburban area of Kunming, the roads designated for heavy trucks were badly damaged and many trucks transporting construction materials were instead surreptitiously using a tourist route near an ancient temple, generating tremors that caused hundreds-of-years-old statues inside the temple to crack. The officer hoped YXM could write a story and call for the government to repair the truck route, saving the precious relics. YXM did the story, and the government repaired the road, saving the precious relics (September 16).

• Investigative journalist JHD cited a big scoop, a profile of a jailed government official, as her story of greatest achievement. At the time, the prisoner was the highest ranked official to be sacked for corruption in the province. JHD and several colleagues took on an onerous reporting challenge that traced the life journey of this official, from his hometown to places he had worked. They talked to his mother, childhood friends, school teachers, former colleagues, and even a fortune teller who the official was said to

trust most. It was difficult, JHDsaid, but they felt the results portrayed the essence of the character (October 25).

• Veteran journalist PYZ wrote a story about a migrant worker who slept in a sewer tunnel that helped the man get back to his hometown. Not only did readers donate money for his train ticket, the local government in the migrant worker's hometown repaired his house. "This matter had a perfect result," PYZ said(September 26, I). He added that his initial motivation to write the story was not to help the person. Rather, he thought using a sewer tunnel as a bedroom was a rare curiosity and readers would be interested. What happened next was beyond his expectation, he said, as was the great sense of achievement the story conferred.

• HJC wrote about a young woman who had jumped from the fourth floor of a building to escape a rapist, injuring her spine and fracturing her pelvis. The article generated more than 100,000 yuan in readers' donations, prompted the hospital to waive charges for treatment, and saved the victim from being paralyzed—the young woman now could walk with a cane. "Because I can help others, do something for others, I feel the value of my existence," HJC said (September 22, I).

• SMY wrote about an 8-year-old girl who rescued her 1-year-old brother from a house fire and suffered severe burns. This story generated more than 700,000 yuan in donations for the medical treatment that enabled the girl to survive. SMY said the public generosity amounted to a sum far beyond his expectations (September 6).

• WeiF's story about a 2-year-old boy with anemia helped to bring in more than 200,000 yuan needed for his surgery, which was beyond the means of his migrant worker parents. "That kind of feeling, that I helped someone; there was quite a sense of achievement in my heart," WeiF said (October 8, II).

• A TV journalist reported on migrant workers' young children getting paid to sort through chili peppers with their bare hands, despite the burning pain caused by the strong spice. She thought her story might help these children in exposing what might be illegal

child labor and deterring others from subjecting children to such a harmful job (October 12, III).

• A photographer's photos and story about a handicapped flower seller in Kunming's streets helped to boost the vendor's business, and the photographer said, "I am very happy that I can speak for him" (September 13).

• Investigative journalist TLX, who has covered all kinds of corruption and wrongdoing, saw a story about lung disease among some migrant workers as his biggest achievement because it helped laborers and had a national impact, contributing to the country's first law on preventing and treating work-related illness among migrant workers (October 12, II).

• Reporter XYin wrote about some veteran soldiers from the Republic of China era, who had been conscripted by the Kuomintang government during World War II to fight the Japanese in the remote locales in Yunnan, with some even crossing the border to fight in Myanmar. Mostly forgotten since the Communists took power, some of these veterans lived in disparate parts of Yunnan's mountainous areas, lonely and deprived. XYin recalled visiting one on a rainy, foggy night, "That was the most difficult and most horrifying road I have ever traveled," she said. "The steering wheel of the vehicle kept turning on its own, out of control. It took us 2 hours to drive 7 kilometers (about 4 miles). I thought I was going to die on the road." Once at the soldier's home, she found, "there was nothing, just a few wooden stools. Coal ashes were everywhere. His bed was nothing but some hay and worn-out cotton wadding on the floor." XYin felt proud that her story made more people pay attention to these abandoned veterans, but even more important was the actual personal visits. "For these veterans, making them feel that there is finally someone paying attention and acknowledging them is the biggest comfort of their lives. Some veterans cried the moment they saw you" (September 27, II). To this reporter, she knew the value of her work because the experience touched her heart.

In sum, when assessing their own role, journalists in this study no longer hold the old and gold notion of journalists as “kings without crowns,” a term portraying journalists as noble and capable of accomplishing the impossible. The glorious illusion of journalists is further dissolved when journalists recognize their group status as similar to migrant workers, with low pay as well as social status. While acknowledging the limits of their reach, these journalists also take seriously their responsibility for the public. Meanwhile, they aspire to make a difference, uphold social fairness and justice, monitor power, and help people in need, obtaining a sense of achievement through helping disadvantaged individuals. They also think good journalism should be objective, fair, rational and truth revealing, although they often do not refrain from sympathizing with the poor and powerless. Such job definition, collective identity, shared values, ideals and beliefs constitute the meanings journalists assign to their work and therefore the substance of Kunming’s journalism culture.

CHAPTER 7 THE FORM OF KUNMING'S JOURNALISM CULTURE

This chapter examines journalists' common practices and patterns of behavior through which they carry out or materialize shared beliefs and values.

Helping Individuals in Need

The theme of helping in the previous chapter as a value, a mission, and a source of achievement and success in journalism carries through into this chapter in practices. Many journalists invest great energy and even getting personally involved in helping others while doing news work.

A reporter related to me her experience with news about a bone marrow donor. She went to cover the story, only to find out that the donor had changed her mind in the middle of the marrow transplant when the machinery malfunctioned. A doctor said the recipient could die without sufficient stem cells. "I knew right away that this was big news," the reporter said—actually more than that, a life-vs.-death situation with a window of 48 hours in which she felt compelled to intervene and help the recipient. At the request of the doctor, she tried to persuade the donor by phone to finish the procedure. The donor would not change her mind and the donor's mother cursed the reporter for suggesting that a donor failing to finish the donation would look bad in the news story. "I didn't help the patient and I felt so sorry," the reporter recalled. "I couldn't even eat. Really couldn't stand it." She said she thought if the patient died, she would have to shoulder some responsibility for somehow pushing the donor a bit too much and causing resentment. Fortunately, the patient survived.

Soon afterwards, the reporter volunteered to be a marrow donor, waiting for the right recipient—to make up for her failure to help the patient, she said. In retrospect, she regretted that she did not handle the situation more calmly and considered only the life of the patient while ignoring the health concerns of the donor. "I should be more objective. On this matter, there were too much personal emotions," she said (October 19, III).

At a different newspaper, a supervisor described how a man had walked into the newsroom six years earlier to say he wanted to post an advertisement looking for someone—the birth parents of his daughter, whom he had picked up from a cardboard box left on the roadside 10 years before. The man said that over the years, he had rescued 21 abandoned babies, most girls, and later found them homes either with their birth parents or adopted parents, except for this one girl whose birth parents were nowhere to be found, even though he knew their names from a note left with the baby. The man was poor, making a living by collecting and recycling trash and waste, and he did not want the girl to live like that forever.

Moved by the man's kindness, the supervisor, then a reporter, not only write four rather long stories but also became actively involved in searching for the girl's parents. As he wrote in one of his stories, the reporter contacted local police in the town thought to be the parents' hometown and police found more than 20 people on record with the same name as the mother and no matching record for the father. The only other clue they had was a phone number left in the cardboard box with the baby girl, which turned out to be that of the girl's aunt. When the girl called, the aunt refused to reveal where her parents were and hung up. The reporter urged the girl to call back right away, and this time, the aunt said the parents had abandoned her because they wanted a boy, already having a girl, and did not want to pay the fine for violating the one-child policy for a girl. They later did have a boy and therefore had no room for a third child.

Ultimately the girl gave up trying and decided to stay with the man who had brought her home. By this time, the Kunming reporter's coverage had become national news. The baby-rescuer was interviewed by several other media outlets, including CCTV, China's authoritative national network, and the reporter also was interviewed by national TV and choked up a dozen times while telling the story as he thought about the man and child "living in the middle of piles of trash, keeping each other company in a crammed 10-squrare-meter room." The reporter's sympathy and admiration, emotional investment

and active involvement in the story brought the case national recognition along with moral, financial and material help for the man and the girl. “I felt that as a journalist, I can indeed help people,” the reporter said (September 22, II).

In some cases, reporters willingly take on the role of agent for the powerless in dealing with authorities, such as the reporter who met with a teenage girl who had come to the newsroom seeking help. The girl, whose parents were migrant workers in Kunming, could not participate in high school entrance exams because she did not have registered residence in Kunming, which meant she had no chance to attend high school in the city where her parents were working. Even though the girl and her parents had brought their case to the court and gained a favorable verdict, the ruling cannot be enforced because the government agency in charge of schooling would not cooperate. The reporter visited the family’s cramped home and accompanied the girl to the Yunnan Education Administration offices. “Now government agencies wouldn’t give a damn about a common folk,” he said. “If she went along, nobody would even look at her. If she came with a reporter, they would pay attention, because if it showed up in a newspaper, the leaders would criticize them. They are afraid of that.” (August 9). He noted that the family did not have resources to pay for school elsewhere or send her abroad. After several attempts to talk to the educational officials, the best response they got was that the girl could take the exam the next year (October 8, II).

Some journalists undertake special projects outside their regular job to do something for people they perceive as disadvantaged. A 26-year-old web editor put in many extra hours for months to organize a city tour for rural children, many of whom live with grandparents or other relatives, visiting their migrant worker parents in Kunming during summer vacation. Having grown up in a village, this editor felt a strong connection with the children. She spent time on the phone and web as well as outside the newsroom enlisting sponsors to provide free admissions and other support for the event, and eventually took more than 20 children to the zoo, a children’s museum and a fire

station. The two-day tour was free for participants, and the newspaper provided transportation and lunch. After the event, she told me, "Many of these children never went to the zoo, and it was impossible for them to visit the firefighters. We have this platform, this ability to take them there. Parents and kids were very happy. I myself was happy, too, feeling I helped them" (October 19, II).

Monitoring Power

In practice, it takes courage and often complicated tactics to achieve coverage monitoring the powerful, and the journalists who try to do so say they try their best.

One local paper covered a ferry boat sinking incident in Hunan Province, where one of the paper's reporters happened to be visiting his family. Nine middle school students and three adults died in the accident. The paper focused on questioning elements that contributed to the sinking, such as the local government's postponing of building a bridge on the lake so that students going to school across the lake would not have to take the ferry, as well as lack of regulation and supervision at the ferry port, which allowed the opportunity for construction boats to operate nearby—the ferry had toppled when it ran into a steel cable anchoring the other boats. The story clearly took the side of the people and pointed out the government's failures. The chief editor of the paper praised the story during an editors' meeting, but also reminded his staff that handling this kind of story required a lot of care, since it overtly criticized the authorities (September 13).

For that very reason, journalists have developed ways to pursue watchdog coverage without causing trouble. One device is to avoid making judgments or attributing blame. "Whether it is heavy rain or extremely heavy rain, do not define easily," one executive told his staff (August 1). This same executive gave an example of covering news without offering definition, with his own paper's handling of a local official's sex photo scandal, opening with a front page display of two images. The caption for the top image reads: "[Kunming] government official's sex photo: been PS; still in office," and

the one for the lower image: “Chengdu government official flirting on weibo: not been PS; removed from office.” The acronym “PS” refers to Photoshop, meaning digital manipulation.

The top image showed a man and woman unclothed on a bed, with their lower bodies covered by a comforter, which had been posted and widely circulated on the Internet. The man in the photo was identified, first by netizens and later confirmed by authorities, as a local government official, and the place was said to be a spa—a likely place for underground prostitution. The full story, run on page 5, said Kunming police had decided the photo was actually Photoshopped and thus fake. The pictured official was still in office. The other story explaining the second image, this time on page 12, said the Chengdu official had been found flirting with some woman on weibo and removed from office. The executive called the package “doing news to the extreme.” He said, “No need to define the nature [of the incident]; just juxtapose news, and people will know the trick.” Juxtaposing these two stories on page one was the paper’s subtle way to express criticism, without expressly saying as much, of how local authorities were protecting their own.

Addressing official scandal at the local level in the local press, even subtly, is considered rather brave, and this executive acknowledged that it could be risky. “Some people think maybe our steps are too big, that we are trying to get people’s attention by saying something impressive. But frankly, we have to do this, otherwise there is no market. Being simple and play safe, that won’t work.” He encouraged his editors “not to be afraid” and to dare to “throw some bombshells,” and said those who “sound the alarm in their hearts” from the outset and avoid going after a story are penning themselves in. He noted that Kunming propaganda authorities had instructed local media to “have some mercy” in coverage of the sex photo scandal but never issued any formal story ban, so it was up to the media to rise to the occasion. “How to master the degree [of daring], this is the question facing all the newspapers with conscience among metro papers,” he said.

"On the grounds of being realistic and practical, we need to explore our own way" (August 8).

In covering disputes or contending interests, journalists have various ways to avoid being reprimanded or even punished by the authorities, or getting sued by sources. A reporter told me, "Nowadays when we cover news, we are not allowed to determine responsibility, define the nature [of an issue], or define the roles [of involved parties]. This has become a norm." Not doing so can lead to trouble, as journalists at his paper learned in covering a dispute between the local traffic police and a street vendor. The police had taken away the woman's horse cart, leaving her and her horse in the cold. The reporter sent to cover the story felt sorry for the woman in her struggle to make a living, and the language of his story showed his sympathies. The woman brought a copy of the newspaper to the police station as supposed proof of mistreatment, and demanded that the police to feed her horse while she ate free meals at their dining hall. She did that for a month before finally leaving the police station on her own. The police, meanwhile, called the paper and requested a "positive story" about them, and the paper complied. The police then posted that story on a window of their office building as a rebuttal to the woman's story (September 26, I). My informant used this as an example of a story that got out of control and left nobody satisfied, so journalists have learned to be more careful.

Undercover Reporting

Unlike in the United States, where deception in the quest of a news story is broadly considered a transgression in journalism, such means are widely condoned in Kunming. Among local investigative journalists, going undercover to get information is a fairly prevalent practice.

A longtime reporter, now a supervisor, described how he once pretended to be a relative of local people to investigate illegal gold mining on the Jinsha River. For three

days, he stayed with a family close to the river, and played the curious visitor while chatting with gold miners. Local people said the mining was controlled by mobs. “It was dangerous. I myself alone had to face a group of people, and those people all had hunting rifles,” the reporter said. “After finishing the interviews, I felt cold sweat all over my body. Even my legs were collapsing” (October 18, I). He did get the story.

A reporter investigating an operation said to be adulterating meat with water to make it weigh more pretended to be looking for quality meat for a company that wanted to give its employees bonuses for Moon Festival, a major Chinese holiday. He and some television reporters began at a livestock market, where they purchased a live bull, then transported it to a slaughter house and recorded with a hidden camera the whole process of beef processing, including how water was infused into the beef (September 16).

This reporter said he generally reveals his real identity when conducting interviews with government officials, because, “If you say you are a common folk, nobody [in government] will look at you, and the guards will shoo you away” (September 16). Reporters also say they are unlikely to go undercover for positive stories, such as promoting government policies or singing somebody’s praises (October 8, I). But for the adulterated beef story, the reporter said hiding their true purposes was the only way. “If we said we were reporters, we sure would be beaten and driven out. They [slaughter house workers] will attack us with their knives. This is foreseeable. We can only go undercover. Also, reporters cannot force people to do interviews. People could ignore you. Going undercover can get more stuff. Reporters get what they need under circumstances that are legal and moral, then that is fine. It is too rigid to differentiate between undercover and overt coverage.”

Even when the issue at hand does not involve serious crimes or life-threatening danger, however, reporters sometimes play-act. One day, I went with a reporter and a photographer to investigate vendors selling uncertified cosmetic contact lenses at a cartoon art fare—such lenses being popular among teenagers who like to dress up like

comic book characters. After strolling along for quite a while, the reporter found an offending booth, peddling contacts in all kinds of bright colors that were immersed in some kind of liquid in small glass bottles. The reporter asked the price, just like a regular customer, and inquired why there were no labels on the bottles. The seller said the labels had been removed so people could see what was inside, and then showed us bottles with labels on, printed with Korean, saying the products were imported from Korea.

We found another booth selling identical products, and again acted like interested consumers. After each encounter, the reporter would go somewhere out of view to scribble her notes. She never told anybody at the fair that she was a reporter. The photographer, meanwhile, used his iPhone to take pictures, keeping his large camera in his bag the whole time. The first seller nevertheless realized he was taking pictures and asked him to stop, saying the products were not available elsewhere. “I just thought they look lovely,” the photographer responded with a smile.

After our visit to the fair, the reporter went to some optical stores and asked what documentation a legitimate contact product should have, again acting like a customer. “For information that I can get as a customer, it is not necessary to reveal my identity as a reporter,” she said, adding that if she revealed her identity, some stores might give her more information but some might be concerned about possible negative coverage and would tell less. She obtained a brochure that detailed the required certification for contact lenses (August 19).

One investigative reporter said she has covered news covertly more often than overtly. “If you do not go undercover, you will get nothing,” she said. “If you reveal your identity, again you will get nothing, and it will be dangerous.” This reporter is not from Yunnan and does not speak the dialect. Speaking Mandarin, she often tells people that she is an investigator sent by the provincial government. In many places in Yunnan, where people seldom meet native Mandarin speakers, people generally believe her, she said (October 25).

Reporters who use undercover methods, sometimes involving fooling others, see them as essential for getting people to divulge truthful information. “It is not nice to fool people,” said one reporter, “but this is a working technique and does not violate professional ethics. It is permissible. Fooling people and undercover reporting are not matters of professional ethics, but are solutions driven by reality. American journalists can cover news with their identities revealed, but it cannot be done in China. Without undercover reporting, the truth of a story cannot be told” (September 13).

Undercover reporting is not without its critics in this context, although they are few. One TV journalist expressed concern that his colleagues are too ready to go undercover, especially with hidden cameras, saying, “Under the name of undercover reporting you can shoot anything. This is horrifying. A lot of things we report undercover should not be reported undercover. It’s breaching people’s privacy and yet not reporting what needs to be covered” (October 12, III).

Maintaining Delicate Relations with Authorities

Watchdog coverage often casts authorities in an unfavorable light, and journalists must navigate their relationships with authority figures with care, since the agents of government and other centers of power control much of the information the newspapers rely upon. Journalists in Kunming frequently meet up with government officials over meals and alcohol for the purpose of what they call *gou tong*, or communicating.

The first time I met one executive, he was on his way to have lunch with some government officials. “They need to communicate with me about city patrol beating up a vendor,” he told me. Apparently his paper had run stories about the incident. The officials weren’t necessarily going to give him trouble, he said. “They just want to communicate. They are not very happy. It’s a *Hongmen yan*” (September 7). “Hongmen yan” is an ancient Chinese legend involving a dinner scheme to murder invited guests, and the executive used this term to indicate the hostile nature of the meeting.

It's not unusual for journalists and news executives to be invited to such meetings after publication of critical stories on government agencies and officials, on businesses, or on rich and powerful individuals. The host inevitably will request the newspaper to stop pursuing certain coverage, or even to run favorable stories to counter any negative impact.

Sometimes, journalists will host government officials to get access to certain information or sources. During a meeting, a supervisor told his chief editor that he had invited officials from the police and a prison for dinner on the forthcoming Friday, because the paper hoped to obtain an exclusive interview with a criminal awaiting execution—Li Changkui, notorious rapist and murderer who had been sentenced to death by the provincial supreme court. The supervisor suggested that the chief editor or other top leaders at the newspaper needed to attend the dinner as well if they hoped to gain permission to interview Li in prison. "Friday evening!?" the chief editor yelled out, and said he was supposed to be attending a wedding on Friday evening. The supervisor insisted that the presence of either the chief editor or someone of comparable standing had to attend the dinner, and others at the meeting joked that the chief editor could just give the new couple a red envelope and then go to the dinner. The chief editor indicated that perhaps his associate editor could go (September 6). "China is a society valuing personal relations," the supervisor later told me, adding the mutual dinner invitations "are all etiquette" (September 27, I). The dinner he orchestrated went on as planned, although the officials eventually refused to let the paper interview Li Changkui in prison.

Even as journalists are careful not to sour relations with sources in government, they do not want to be mere mouthpieces and view some degree of criticism of the authorities as essential for appealing to readers. Journalists have to figure out how to balance these contradicting demands. A supervisor who often receives complaining phone calls from media relations people after critical stories run said she usually tries to

respond in a sympathetic tone, telling the caller her boss is responsible for these coverage decisions, and things will calm down after a couple of days (September 22, I).

A health reporter has learned that covering problems in the implementation of certain policies is more palatable to health officials than criticizing the policies per se. She also follows newsletters from the authorities and adopts preferred turns of phrase, such as saying some work "is not sufficiently done" instead of using harsher terms. "Use expressions that tell the news, and also are acceptable to them. Win win," she said. She acknowledged, however, that in several years on this beat she has never revealed any corruption cases within the health care system not because no corruption exists, but because she does not want to upset her sources. "If you offend people on the beat, it is hard to hold your rice bowl in the future," she said. "The range of your coverage will become narrower and narrower. Journalists who reveal [bad stuff] in China are suppressed, retaliated against, expelled, or risk being killed," she said (October 19, III). She mentioned Wang Liqin, a journalist whose investigative reporting team was ordered to be dismissed and now devoting to public charity projects instead of journalism.

A supervisor who covered police and courts for many years and earned a reputation as a fierce and outspoken critic of malfeasance, takes a bolder approach. He had recently sent a reporter to investigate a story related to police in Kunming's Wuhua District, which is seen as the most powerful police branch in the city since the provincial government is headquartered in the same district. Wuhua police had accidentally included a new college graduate's information into their nationwide wanted list, and the young man was detained multiple times while trying to find a job around the country. The young man sued the police and got 30,000 yuan in compensation, and was told he had been removed from the list, but subsequently he was detained yet again. The paper published the story, whereupon someone at the media relations office of the police branch called to curse the reporter over the phone. The supervisor then called the police caller's

supervisor to say they should complain to him directly, and not bother his reporter. “They dare not call me directly,” the supervisor said.

Still, even this experienced newsman sees the need to handle what he calls “both open rivalry and veiled strife” relation between journalists and authorities with care. He says that over time, as the paper accumulates a record of critical reporting that is “right on target,” authorities do not respond with complaints as much as they used to. He now has to pick his fight, said this supervisor said, and he will push for in-depth investigation only on certain issues. He said authorities in the past might openly boycott a paper that ran unfavorable stories, announcing that they would not accept interview requests from that paper. But the “hard boycott” is practiced less and less, in part because a paper can disclose what is happening on the Internet, prompting public criticism. The authorities have wised up and now the fear is a “soft boycott” (*ruan fengsha*), he said: without announcing any boycott intention, the authorities simply do not inform a paper about news releases or press conferences, and the paper misses stories, something local papers loathe given the fierce competition among them (August 26).

In short, if they are to exercise the monitoring function, journalists cannot completely avoid upsetting the authorities, but at the same time have to be careful not to go too far. And in the age of the Internet and mobile devices, which have further eroded the establishment’s power to manage the news, relationships between journalists and sources, newspapers and their subjects, the media and other institutions have become increasingly complex and delicate, mixing cooperation and conflict, dependence and resistance, friendship and enemity.

To sum up, common journalistic practices discussed in this chapter—helping individuals in need, conducting watchdog coverage, undercover reporting, and maintaining delicate relations with authorities—materialize journalists’ shared values and beliefs such as monitoring power, making a difference, revealing truth, as well as their regard of helping others as their best professional achievement. These practices constitute

the form of Kunming's journalism culture and are closely related to the substance of the culture as already discussed in the previous chapter. Looking closely, it is not hard to see how these practices are restrained, especially in cases of monitoring the powerful. Journalists need to be very careful in their watchdog coverage, concealing their identity, minding the degree, and avoiding judgment and definition, not to mention dealing with reactions from the authorities. These restrains reveal another crucial facet of the occupational culture, which will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8 CONSTRAINTS AND REACTIONS

The previous two chapters have examined Kunming journalists' job definitions, sense of collective identity, shared values and beliefs, and some aspects of how values and beliefs are materialized in their actions and behaviors. The picture, however, is far from complete. In fact, one striking finding to emerge from my fieldwork is that meanings of work that many of these journalists hold to their hearts often are not fulfilled in practice. In other words, the substance and form of the journalism culture under investigation do not automatically and seamlessly correspond with each other.

Why so? The answer, I would suggest, lies largely in the myriad constraints, obstacles and limitations that the journalists in Kunming face in their daily work. Examining perceptions and manifestations of Kunming's journalism culture only in terms of expressed substance and perceptible form is insufficient. The many constraints significantly shape this journalism culture, and journalists' responses to constraints—cognitively, symbolically, emotionally and in practice—also constitute an essential part of their occupational culture. This chapter is devoted to these constraints as well as journalists' reaction to them.

Obstructions to and Troubles from Reporting

Upon setting out to cover stories, journalists often can expect to face obstructions to their reporting.

A reporter told me about an experience several years earlier when he and two colleagues arrived at a local court in a small town for a hearing. After they had been sitting in the courtroom for a short while, the judge suddenly adjourned the hearing. Next thing they knew, a few court police officers had surrounded them and were asking what they were doing there. The officers also attempted to grab the reporter's audio recorder by force and in the process scratched his neck, events caught on camera by the photojournalist in the group. "Whoa, that was too big. [The officers] insisted on smashing

the camera. Now it was even harder for us to get away," the reporter recounted. The three of them were then detained separately in three rooms and questioned by court officials trying to figure out their purpose of visit, because the case was rather sensitive. The officials also took away their keys, cellphones and recorders. Eventually, the officials asked the journalists to sign off on the interrogation record. They refused. The officials would not let them go. Finally, my informant said, he signed, putting the date and a comment that the court had "made three reporters from the provincial capital encounter the darkest day in journalism history." They were finally released (September 27, I).

Interference with reporting does not always come from government—business interests can be just as touchy, and sometimes business people and local officials are in cooperation. A journalist of several years' experience told me about covering a coal mine accident in an area where small mines are of considerable importance to the local economy. "The owner of the coal mine threatened us, wouldn't let us get in, and didn't allow us to report. He was trying to irritate us and instigate a fight. He locked us up for a couple of hours. The local propaganda department also tried to force us to leave. They cut the power to the hotel where we were staying so that we couldn't transmit the story. They stopped our vehicle … and took us to the local propaganda department, let us stay in the office, and later sent us off to a different town while following us. We finally got rid of these people and sent the story from an Internet café." The reporter added that the meddling was no surprise, because the story touched on problems with the mine and the local government. "But we were still scared, feeling it was risky to be journalists. We didn't feel heroic or excited, just [relieved] that we finally had finished the assignment" (September 16).

Sometimes the threats become more obvious. A photojournalist of ten years related a nasty scare he and some colleagues had while covering a coal mine accident. The coal mine had released a death toll of three, but some tipsters reported a death toll of 11. The discrepancy was important because three deaths would only require reporting to

the provincial authorities, while 11 deaths required reporting to the central authorities. “The boss of the mine threw a bag of money in front of us, and told us, ‘If you guys do not take this bag of money, I will use it to buy your lives.’ I deleted materials in my camera right in front of him.” After leaving the mine, they filed the story and fled the town in a hurry, without even checking out at their hotel (October 16).

In addition to obstructions to the reporting, journalists may face retaliation afterwards. One investigative journalist I interviewed is even writing a book about such experiences. On his computer, he showed me his draft manuscript, which includes 20 cases. Going down the table of contents with his cursor, he enumerated the first three: “This one almost cost my job, this one almost cost my job, and this one almost cost my life.” A local mine in a small town also figures in one of the episodes in his book. In the aftermath of his reporting on problems at the mine, the township government tried to smear him in an online posting. The allegation was that the “dark heart reporter” had taken a bribe of more than 10,000 yuan. Consequently, the reporter was investigated by provincial authorities, and was finally cleared of a charge that would have destroyed his reputation. “After this incident, I kept silence for a while,” refraining from investigative assignments, he recalled. “Later my name was cleared, but there is always a shadow.” He’s now more reticent in taking on investigations, he said: “I think it over, whether or not it is feasible.” He also thinks about his family. “After having a kid, I feel the society is too complicated, too dangerous. I no longer have the same passion as before” (October 12, II).

Along with obstruction or retribution against individual journalists, news organizations may face trouble after running stories reflecting badly on powerful interests. This can range from verbal complaints to official warnings, directives to write self-criticisms, and even lawsuits. “There are high risks for doing in-depth, watchdog coverage,” said an experienced editor. Authorities and subjects of such stories would

come back with attacks on the paper, he said, adding that he himself had penned many of the required self-criticisms.

Lawsuits generally come from private parties, and journalists and organizations accused of libel or invasion of privacy often fare badly in Chinese courts. As I was writing this dissertation, Paper A was in the midst of trying to fend off a libel suit the plaintiff had filed in response to a story documenting how he and his thuggish brothers bullied their fellow villagers.

Story Bans

To some journalists, danger, threats and difficulties are simply challenges to be surmounted. Some journalists even find being detained by local authorities rather thrilling. What journalists cannot stand, however, is when their stories get killed even after they have gone through all that bother and sometimes considerable risk.

The journalist who was detained and then released by a local court had such an experience. After being let go, he recalled, “the three of us were extremely excited. We realized that the biggest story had just happened!” That night, with no access to a computer, he and his colleagues wrote about the incident by hand in great excitement. With the help of a local post office staffer, who also had a lot of complaints about the local court, they managed to fax the story back to Kunming around 2 a.m. At that point the editor in charge hesitated, and told the reporter that consultation with provincial judiciary authorities had determined that this incident would paint a negative image of Yunnan’s judiciary system, and therefore the story would not be published. “I argued with him on the phone, and slammed down the phone,” the reporter said. “I continued to argue with him after returning [to Kunming], slapped the table in front of him, and went on strike for a while.” But nothing could bring the story back to life (September 27, I).

Jin ling, or story bans, are all too familiar to journalists in Kunming. They may get issued before reporting has begun, but often they arrive when reporting is well

underway or completed, or, as with the example above, when the story is written and ready for the presses. Indeed, the prospect of story bans figures into newsroom routines.

An experienced and especially enthusiastic investigative reporter who has a great deal of familiarity with story bans told me about going to a remote town to investigate a report that the local government had forced divorced men there to be sterilized as part of enforcing the one-child policy—although forced sterilization actually violates the policy. On their way to the town, she and a colleague encountered a landslide in the middle of the night. A boulder broke through the windshield of their vehicle and landed on the passenger seat, which luckily was not occupied. She called the local police, who refused to come to their rescue because of the bad weather. She then had to call her boyfriend, who worked in the provincial government, who in turn phoned the local Party secretary, the highest local official, and the police finally came. The reporter returned to Kunming but soon traveled back to the town and got the story. Yet after all the hard work, it was never published—because, her supervisor said, it could be used by the West to criticize China's human rights situation.

Another time, the same reporter traveled to a mountainous area in northern Yunnan to investigate alleged illegal mining. This story also was killed, in this case because Tibetan people inhabited the area, which made any reporting from there politically sensitive. "I was pretty upset," she said. "I now can accept the fact that some stories won't be published, but I still try to finish them." Both stories were eventually filed as "internal reference" accounts, or *neican,* reports that officials above a certain rank can read but are not accessible to the public. The reporter said she knows internal reference materials are read by decision makers, but she prefers letting the readers know first, and then having the government solve the problems. "Only this way, [media] can push for social progress and let people take warnings," she said. "Internal reference materials can only solve individual cases, but have no warning effect for the entire society" (September 26, II).

Some story bans prevent coverage altogether, as in the case of the retrial of Li Changkui, a convicted rapist and murderer. Initially the Yunnan Supreme Court sentenced him to death with reprieve, which generally means the person will end up serving a life term and be spared execution. The decision generated a huge public outcry, mainly expressed on the Internet, from people who thought Li deserved immediate execution for his brutality. Under the public pressure, the Yunnan Supreme Court reopened the trial, and around 9 p.m. on the day of the reconsideration, word arrived at the newsroom that Li had been sentenced to death. The night editor told other editors that the paper would expand coverage of this ruling and cut back on space for other stories. The problem, however, was that the newspaper had no independent coverage of the event because the court had not allowed local metro papers access. Given the enormous public attention to the story, the local paper could not neglect it.

The editors were not to be deterred and the result illustrates the sort of careful ingenuity with which Kunming journalists sometimes get around constraints. The solution here was to borrow stories from newspapers in other regions, which did have access to information and over which the Yunnan authorities had little control. The editors at the paper began to search the Internet for items and immediately found a report from *Qilu Wanbao*, an evening paper in Shandong Province, sufficient to fill two pages. The night editor in charge went ahead and approved the usage (August 22).

Every year, for two weeks each spring, when thousands of members of China's National People's Congress convene in Beijing for their annual parliamentary meeting, ostensibly to discuss issues and problems on behalf of the people, media control of the highest order is in place. A supervisor recalled receiving on average three story ban notices each day one year while the national congress was in session, listing all kinds of events and people that could not be covered. "I looked at it and went, there is nothing left to do. Let's just have a vacation!" he said. Items on the list included "mass incidents" as

well as individual protests, forced evictions and demolitions, and stories involving certain specific officials (September 21).

Besides straightforward bans to avoid particular stories, or bans that kill stories before they get to the press, newsrooms receive all kinds of coverage guidelines from propaganda authorities. The day after a high speed train collision in Wenzhou, which generated a media frenzy on both social and traditional media, the following directives regarding coverage of the collision arrived at a Kunming newsroom: 1) Rely mainly on the [national] Xinhua News Agency release; 2) demonstrate governmental and social rescue efforts; and 3) do not speculate or make associations. These guidelines were received by an executive, who passed the message to his editors (July 24). The third item reflected authorities' concern that people would link the accident to broader social problems, such as the aggressive pursuit of economic growth at the price of public safety, and possible corruption behind the failure of the track signaling system, apparently the immediate cause of the accident. The Wenzhou collision, which generated huge public dissatisfaction with the government, including the giant bureaucracy of China's railroad system, will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter. The point here is that official alarm at the political ramifications prompted efforts to quash media coverage in the hopes of containing public anger.

Political sensitivities are not restricted to domestic news. In another example, an editor was planning a multi-page overview of the U.S. Occupy Wall Street movement. He had collected all the articles he wished to use when, a day before everything was to be laid out, he received a text message from a supervisor saying Occupy news should be downplayed. Specifically, it banned any extensive coverage, including attention to public rallies, and also called for restraint on journalists' own microblog accounts. The package-in-progress was killed. "Sometimes the propaganda authorities are nonsensical," the editor said. "I can only obey the rules of the game: do it when allowed, stop when

prohibited, no need to argue, and no need to think about whether it is reasonable" (October 21, II).

The government sometimes asks local papers to obscure certain information within sensitive stories. One late afternoon in August, news broke that a gas leak on a subway construction site had led to the death of a construction worker and two injuries. A reporter who got there posted this information along with a photo of the accident scene on his personal microblog (August 2). The next day, the story was in local papers, but the specific site was not identified. Rather, the papers referred simply to "a construction site," or "a municipal construction site." One supervisor explained that Kunming propaganda authorities had asked local media not to reveal that the gas leak was on a subway line because of the sensitivities about subway construction (August 3).

Kunming's subway construction was a sensitive topic because the municipal government had invested heavily in the project, both financially and politically, regarding it as a major strategic move for the city's future development. The construction had been underway for months, creating huge holes and giant hills of debris everywhere, blocking traffic, covering streets with dirt and mud and generally causing chaos across the city. People were complaining and started to doubt the benefits of the project. Thus the request to keep any hint of mishap out of the papers.

The Red Line

Kunming journalists all know to be wary about the "red line" (*hong xian*), or the absolute boundary beyond which they cannot go. But nobody can delineate the line absolutely. One reporter enumerates anti-government comments and stories that could shake social stability or undermine unity among ethnic groups as off limits (September 6). An executive says red line topics for metro papers include religion, ethnic minorities, military and the political system. "China is not like the United States, which has a constitution to protect freedom of speech," he said (October 12, I). In fact Article 35 of

the Chinese constitution *does* promise citizens the right to "freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration," but unlike with the U.S. First Amendment, nothing in China's law prevents Party and government powers from trumping those rights.

At one editorial meeting, the paper's chief editor warned his staff of the risk of using weibo as a source for stories, saying, "If you use one wrong item, it could bring fatal consequences to the paper." He then stressed the importance of having a good grasp of the red line. "These days doing media work is like walking on a tightrope or by the cliff. If you have no guts, the market and public will reject you. If you dare too much, the Party and government will reject you" (July 25). At another meeting, the same chief editor cautioned against too much emphasis on issues such as protecting basic human rights, but still urged his staff to go beyond pure news and dare to demonstrate some values and "attitudes" (*taidu)* as long as they did not step over the red line. "We are trying to survive in the cracks," he said (September 13).

Indeed, for metro papers, business success hinges on being audacious and outspoken without stepping over the red line. This is partly to fulfill journalistic ideals of acting as watchdog and speaking for the people, and partly to gain an edge in the harsh competition among local papers. As one executive put it: "Without monitoring, [the media] will have no attraction. This is the law of the market" (October 12, I). At the same time, the double requirement of being bold and hewing to the proper side of the red line inevitably poses dilemma and figuring out the balance is a challenge journalists face every day.

Business Pressure

Political pressures have long been salient to Chinese journalists, but increasingly, requests and complaints from advertisers have created new tensions for newsrooms. A Kunming chief editor was stunned to learn in an editor's meeting that China Mobile, the

country's biggest mobile service provider, could fine his newspaper for publishing a story naming the company if the company did not like the story. Some supervisors said the paper had paid a 100,000 yuan deposit to China Mobile when the company purchased advertising, under an agreement that if the paper ran stories harmful to China Mobile, fines would be deducted from the deposit. The chief editor immediately called in the executive in charge of ads and asked why he had signed such an agreement. It turned out that this was standard practice and the chief editor could do nothing, except to tell his staff that in the future, any negative items involving China Mobile should avoid mentioning the company's name (August 31).

A reporter at a different paper encountered something similar when he went to cover a fire at an office building, where he ran into a staffer from his paper's advertising department. She had gone there to deliver some gifts to a client, the very company occupied the burning building. Back at the paper, the woman from the ad department found the reporter and asked him if he could leave the company's name out of his story. The reporter replied that, "If the name is withheld, the location will not be clear, and the truthfulness [of the story] will be undermined. This needs to be decided by the higher leaders." The woman left and came back with the directive, "Withhold the name." She said an executive had made the decision, and added: "Sorry for troubling you. Just use the name of the building, not its [the company's] name, and it will be fine. I don't want to do things like this either." The reporter replied, "Don't worry about it" (September 1).

The ad head at one paper said companies often worry about being named in news stories out of concern for "unexpected effects" and fear of giving readers "misunderstanding of the brand," even when all the facts are correct. He attributed this to consumers' mistrust toward businesses in China nowadays. "Consumers' suspicions are influenced by the broader environment in China. Businesses lack credibility, and consumers do not trust them," this executive said (October 13).

Advertisers sometimes have the power to kill a story. A young TV journalist once found out that five apartment buildings under construction were suddenly torn down. The project was being built by a local real estate developer to house people who need temporary quarters because their old homes were slated for demolition for new developments. The reporter went to investigate and learned that the developer, who often boasted of the high quality of such temporary homes, had used thinner, below-standard steel bars in the construction and had to start anew. The story was killed because the developer was a key advertiser at the TV station (October 12, III).

When advertising and news conflict with each other, one paper's ad manager maintained that news is still the priority, saying, "Surely we will do whatever news needs to be done." Sometimes he and his staff must deal with the aftermath of a story and "communicate with the company," he said, and occasionally companies withdraw ad patronage altogether after negative stories, but such cases are not common (October 13).

Another challenge for journalists at times is demarcating straight news coverage from soft or veiled advertising, since this line is easily blurred. One of the Kunming papers once devoted four entire pages to a local real estate company's decision to reduce property prices, because the chief editor saw this move as signaling a new direction of the housing market in Kunming. He also cautioned his staff to be careful while writing the article because the company was a large and growing ad client. After publication, other local media criticized the paper for "licking the real estate developer's thigh," implying the story was actually a soft ad piece intended to please an important advertiser. The editor defended his paper, insisting that the coverage was serious business news, not soft ads, and claiming the other local papers were actually the ones who wanted to please the real estate company (August 3).

Journalists are also wary about how ads affect the look of the news product. One editor said his paper wants to maintain a decent image and thus would not run low-end, poor taste advertisements, such as those for male enhancement products (October 21, II).

But another paper, which has to struggle harder for ad revenue, seems to run whatever ads it can get, sometimes drawing complaints from its news production team. An editor at this second paper, for instance, said an excess of "cheap and ugly" ads in the paper make the pages look bad even when there are solid stories. He said he had successfully fought off some ads for a weekend supplement to protect the integrity of his news product, but still has to compromise, adding, "Ads are always the most important" (August 1).

Frustrated, Disappointed and Conflicted

Obstructions to reporting, retaliation after reporting, story bans, and limitations imposed by political and commercial forces all contribute to cultivating a profound sense of frustration and disappointment among journalists in Kunming, injecting conflicted meanings into their culture.

A photojournalist reflected on, "coal mine owners trying to buy your life, thugs beating you up, riot policemen surrounding and kicking you, all these things just for a few bucks of remuneration, and sometimes your stories don't even get published. Would you still have the will to do the job?" (October 16)

Indeed, some reporters find it hard to be enthusiastic under these circumstances. One young reporter says that as a result of "too many" story bans, "I have become numb. Now I don't even bother to touch sensitive topics. Even if I did the story, I would be doing it in vain." She related how a group of reporters once spent a month investigating an environmental pollution story, only to see it shelved. "We were very upset at that time. We even said if the story was not allowed to be published, we'd resign together and go establish an independent investigative group. Now that I think about it, we were really very naïve back then. So passion dies little by little" (September 27, II). Veteran journalists mostly say they have learned to live with story bans. "No need to be mad. There are too many story bans," said one (September 26, I). An investigative journalist likewise calculates how feasible stories are. "What I fear is that stories cannot be

published, and I can't plea for the people," he says. So he only pursues stories on issues that he figures the government is willing and able to deal with (October 12, II).

For many reporters, frustration emerges or continues even after stories are printed when no real change seems to follow their revelations of problems or wrongdoings. "Can you tell the truth? Is there any use to tell the truth? Any value in the story?" said one supervisor. "If after publishing the story, there is no impact whatsoever, what is the value of the story? What is the value for the media to exist? I am rather pessimistic." He added, however, that to some degree media can function as a watchdog and push for social progress—just not as much nor as fast as he would hope (October 26).

For instance, following the intense and widespread coverage of the Wenzhou train collision, Kunming journalists grew frustrated about government delays in release of the investigation report on the accident. "The government said the investigation report will be released in mid September, but there is nothing up to date," one reporter said in mid-October, going on three months after the crash. "Can you say I am not disappointed? Of course I am" (October 11, II). At an editorial meeting, an executive expressed frustration that media coverage of the collision hadn't had a larger impact. "It started out huge, but the effects are trivial," he bemoaned. "Under the current system, how much effect can media produce?" He acknowledged that one tangible result of the media's collective effort was the government deciding to raise compensation to victims' families from the initial 170, 000 yuan to 971,000 for each death, but he did not see systemic change (August 1).

It then comes as little surprise, therefore, that journalists with a strong desire to make a difference also express a strong sense of frustration over how little difference they can actually make. A veteran journalist put it in this way in an essay he wrote about his career: "Being a journalist has its pains and joys…when we help others through news coverage, we can be ecstatic. Faced with many social realities that we cannot remedy, we really want to cry out. Because being a journalist is just an occupation, we are not

almighty. We want to help everyone who needs help, but that's impossible. We wanted to reveal all the discords in society, but that's impossible." What a journalist can do, he told me, is to "learn the background of an issue" and try to prompt the authorities to investigate. "Otherwise there will be no effect after publishing the story" (September 22, II).

The same journalist thinks good watchdog journalism is necessary to prevent society from becoming "darker and darker" even to the point of "dictatorship." However, he said that little reporting actually gets at the main sources of power. Usually it amounts to "swatting the fly rather than beating the tiger," he said, using a common saying. "Sometimes journalists beat up the soft and shun the hard, but actually we have no choice. We can only monitor those we can" (September 22, II). Similarly, an investigative reporter said, "Of course I want to make a difference, but often times things do not happen as I wish. I can only monitor a drop of water. I can't monitor a big body of water. Otherwise I wouldn't have lived to this day" (October 12, II).

A young reporter who professes to have been inspired by Oriana Fallaci to become a journalist and dreamed of becoming a war correspondent described how her experience has eroded her ideals: "I definitely hope to change something. I fantasize that I report on a corrupt official, and the official will be sacked; report on unreasonable policies, and the policies will be overturned. But in reality, I found out that journalists are powerless. One corrupt official is sacked, and the next one may be more corrupt. A policy is already in place, and it is not something a journalist can shake" (September 27, II).

She went on: "My dream is being broken little by little…I now doubt the value of journalism. I used to think journalists could realize their own dreams, say what they want to say and do things others cannot do. I used to think being a journalist was valuable and meaningful, not just for wages. Now I feel that actually being a journalist is just a job." Then she clarified, "My pessimism for journalism is not toward the profession itself, but toward the general [social] environment in China" (September 27, II).

A photojournalist who "absolutely" had ideals at the beginning of his career has gone through a similar process, finding his heartfelt journalistic ideals getting "smashed by reality" and viewing the problem in light of the larger society. "This nation has no faith. Right now the biggest faith for people is money. China right now is a world for the rich and powerful. A handicapped man who stole an electronic bike to send his wife to see a doctor was sentenced to seven years in prison. A son of a rich family who murdered someone got two years of probation outside prison" (October 16).

This kind of disappointment, not toward news work per se, but toward the government, the entire society, the system, even the country, is rather prevalent among Kunming journalists. An investigative journalist who cares deeply about environmental issues is disappointed about insufficient environmental protection. "[The government] should protect the environment for the future generation" she said, "but officials only want political accomplishments, attracting investments and business, occupying farmland to build industrial parks. Many are energy-consuming, heavily polluting projects that are destroying the environment. I am hurt and worried watching all this, but I cannot solve the problem. There is nothing I can do" (September 26, II).

A supervisor even said to me in the presence of other reporters that he wished to go abroad and live in a foreign country. "They talk about the Chinese dream," he said. "My dream is to leave China. After all these years, I'm very disappointed with this country" (August 30). He later told me that covering societal news for many years had shown him too much of the dark side of society. "At the beginning, I loved my country very much. Later I saw too much, and came to feel this country has too much injustice and makes common people's lives miserable. So if there is an opportunity, I will go live abroad. Maybe I am too extreme. I am often very sad, and can't help but thinking, what if my parents encounter these [bad] situations, what can I do?" (September 21).

An executive acknowledged that people's living standards are improving, but said protection of people's civil rights has not improved a bit. "Everybody could face

violation of their rights at any time, and you cannot find any way to protect yourself" (September 18). A young woman reporter said that despite some social progress, she thinks the government still places itself above citizens and has made no improvements in respect for the common people (October 21, I).

With often passionate aspirations and high expectations on the one hand and deep frustrations and often bitter disappointment on the other, Kunming journalists speak of feeling "*jiu jie*," or entangled, struggling, wrestling, contradicting, conflicted, an overarching term they use quite often.

A young reporter said the obvious gap between his dreams and reality is what makes him conflicted. He became a journalist because he wanted to "pursuit the journalistic ideal that cannot be realized," he said. "China's system has too many problems, and I aspire to a free and democratic society….but this ideal is basically impossible to realize. Everybody has such an ideal at the beginning. Overtime, the reality wears away the ideal. So [we are] very conflicted" (October 11, II).

"Journalists indeed are conflicted. There is pain every day," said a veteran journalist. "I also have turned from an idealist to a pessimist. There is progress, but not enough. I also dream that media controls will be lifted someday, but my dream is ruptured time and time again" (October 21, II).

An executive summarized the conflicted feeling among journalists as follows: "It is torturous to be a journalist in China. You first face a huge rupture—the conflict between story bans and your desire to report the truth. Basically these story bans are intractable. You just can't do anything. Second is capitulation to commercial interests, especially among metro papers. Third, this is an occupation that cannot guarantee high income….many Chinese journalists now cannot afford housing, the very basics for living. This makes people feel deeply frustrated. In addition, as a reporter you also feel frustration over the [poor] effect of media coverage" (September 18).

As prevalent as these sentiments are, frustration and disappointment vary in degree for different journalists. Generally speaking, those who wish for bigger, broader changes tend to express the strongest frustration and disappointment, such as the supervisor who said, “I think as a journalist, what I want is fundamental change to society. Therefore I very much envy Egyptians and Libyans—maybe that’s extreme” (September 14).

Journalists expressing lesser degrees of alienation tend to focus on the merits of gradual, small differences achieved through individual cases rather than on desire for sweeping, society-wide changes. A reporter who finds some comfort in small accomplishments said, “We can only adjust to the big environment. Every interview, every story, they are all big joys. Painful while happy” (October 11, II). A reporter who maintains that she’s quite satisfied with her work said it’s best to “skip the big system, only look at individual issues,” even though she added, “I am very aware of the social reality” (October 19, II). A veteran journalist who said he’s sometimes felt hopeless will nevertheless go after any opportunities to do watchdog reporting. “You just have to try. Despair is accompanied by hope. If two thirds of my stories had no effect and one third had some effect, then that is the utmost achievement” (October 25).

Some journalists, rather than voicing disappointment, use the substitute term “discontent.” News executives typically don’t see the situation as always so bleak. Said an executive from one paper: “There are social conflicts, but the nation is making progress….In this age of nuclear weapons, I don’t hope for revolution, but rather for amelioration and gradual change… China is an isolated case in the world. Its system does not fit human development. But sudden change is not realistic. Problems of social fairness can be dangerous, but the international environment is pushing for China to improve gradually (October 12, I).

Another executive acknowledged his discontent but said he would rather not dwell on it. “At the beginning, I was very idealistic. Now as the chief, [I am] more

concerned about safety of the paper, otherwise the paper will die, then what's the point?...Therefore media people in China are very conflicted. If things went wrong, the paper would die immediately, and that is meaningless….China is experiencing an era of transformation, with many contradictions, twists and turns. But overall it is moving forward. Peace is always better than turmoil. Everybody wishes the country well and hopes the Party can handle things well. If there was turmoil, would I be able to sit here and talk to you? I probably would be beaten to death in the streets!" (October 19, I)

Yet another executive also admitted to discontent about the state of journalism and society, but sees "a buffering space" to maneuver in the media environment. "If one day there is no space whatsoever left, then maybe I will be completely disappointed toward the society" (October 18, II).

Alternative Approaches

Given the constraints and pervading feeling of "*jiu jie*," many journalists are seeking other ways to render their work meaningful.

One chief editor is working toward changing the direction of his paper, which used to use watchdog coverage as a selling point. He said it is simply too difficult to continue focusing on monitoring power because there is too much resistance. "Media monitoring ultimately means monitoring the government, otherwise the government will get even more reckless. Monitoring the government faces the biggest resistance… Watchdog coverage is possible, but it is very difficult to make breakthroughs. The government is still in the process of transition, which takes time" (October 18, II).

He is not alone in trying to shift strategies. Not long before, a competing paper had gone through a makeover and come up with a new motto: "make life more interesting." An executive at this reinvented paper said the new approach is to cover stories that appeal to both readers and the authorities, which in his view is not completely contradictory. "'Interesting' means fun, making people happy after reading it," he said.

"Ask a reader, why did you buy this newspaper? *It is fun!* Just the three words are enough." So what are the actual measures to make the paper fun to read? One tactic is running what he calls "sexy stuff." He pointed to a sports page with a story about LeBron James that also featured a large photo of a Western woman dressed in black lace lingerie, with her back facing the camera, legs split, and head turned around. The provocative image was posited as the "host" of this page. The executive pointed at it with a sly yet proud smile, as if saying, "Look at this! How cool is this!"

This executive said his exemplar is *Dushi Kuaibao*, based in the city of Hangzhou, a newspaper described by one veteran journalist as the trendsetter of the "tender heart approach," a safe approach that appeals to readers without risking confrontation with authorities and has worked very well (October 21, II). The executive says he wants his paper to cover "people's little hobbies, little sadnesses, little pursuits, little dreams." As for loftier objectives, he said, "I do have journalistic ideals, but I won't say it. Meaningless to say it, because you can't achieve it, and what's the use of talking about it? You'll end up head broken and bleeding. What's the point?" His bottom line is the newspaper's survival—only a living newspaper can "speak for the people," he said. "Many newspapers have either been killed by others or committed suicide. I just want to be alive and well" (October 19, I).

This approach has its supporters among rank-and-file journalists, too, such as a veteran reporter who thinks the news media should not pay so much attention to bad news. "If every day is about murder and robbery, people will feel no sense of safety. For the sake of social peace and stability, it is better to cover more good things," she said. "Reading about problems, [people] will get mad but cannot solve the problems. Reading about other's kindnesses, they will be touched and will do what they can [to help others]" (October 8, I).

Some papers, including *Yunnan Information Daily (YID)*, have turned to a new activity they call public interest projects (*gong yi*), essentially initiatives to protect or help

satisfy grass-roots constituencies, from providing assistance to the poor or undertaking environmental protection to helping sick migrant workers. Some newspapers around China now publish supplements for these sorts of public interest projects. *YID* started its own *Public Interest Weekly* (*Gongyi Zhoukan*) in June 2011. In an article publish in *Southern Media Research*, the editor of this weekly, Guo Min, claims that coverage of public interest projects will become a major feature of China's media in the near future (Guo, 2011).

Guo explains in the article why *YID* decided to make such a commitment to public interest projects. The paper previously had a weekly page called "Caring," devoted to stories on helping those in need—poor college students, victims of medical malpractice, low-income people needing medical treatment, and so on. Despite hundreds of thousands of yuan in donations generated through these stories, the coverage stopped short of probing deeper social causes, be it policy deficiencies, lack of legal protections, or moral flaws. The paper wanted to extend the coverage to explore these deeper issues and put more focus on growing social forces seeking change. "Such a force might be the enlightenment," Guo writes.

Another incentive that compelled *YID* to start its own public interest coverage was the collapse of public trust toward China's biggest charity organization, the state-sponsored Red Cross Society of China (RCSC). People increasingly place more confidence in grass-root initiatives or NGOs, and *Public Interest Weekly* is designed to support this trend. Guo Min writes that Yunnan has particular advantages for the growth of grass-root initiatives and NGOs. The province has 25 ethnic minorities, whose cultures and well-being merit concern; it is home to one of the most diversified ecosystems in China but faces severe environmental degradation from aggressive industrialization; and it is also one of the least developed regions in China, with millions needing assistance for medical care, schooling, or just getting by. The ultimate goal of promoting public

interests projects, Guo states, is to facilitate the growth of China's civil society, which he sees as important for social progress (Guo, 2011).

Several high profile journalists have come out in support of a public interest approach, Guo notes, including Deng Fei, a senior editor at the *Phoenix Weekly*, who promotes free lunch programs for schools in less developed areas; and Sun Chunlong, a former journalist in Shanghai, who worked for the return of remains of Chinese soldiers sent to Myanmar to fight the Japanese during World War II (Guo, 2011). Some, such as a news executive, hail the journalists-turned-social activists behind such undertakings as pioneers, and they say frustrated journalists can find greater satisfaction by working with public interest initiatives that produce real results. The executive's paper actively supported Deng Fei's school lunch program, saying combined efforts have pushed China's education ministry to take the idea seriously enough to start an official trial for future expansion of the program. "He pushed the government to carry out a big public interests project, and this is very satisfying," the executive said. "Suppose I just ran a story about some students cannot afford lunch at school, can it make much impact?" (September 18) Others might see the approach as an abdication, or at best a soft-peddling, of journalism's watchdog mission. In any case, the trend has reached Kunming.

To summarize, journalists in this study face all kinds of constraints: risks during covering news, troubles after publishing critical stories, story bans, and none or little real impact. These journalists want to make a difference, and yet have their hands tied by political and economic interests. They have the desire to make the country a better place, but time after time, they see corruption, unfairness and injustice being repeated, even getting worse, and cannot help but doubt the virtue of the entire system, even losing faith in the country. Consequently, most journalists in this study expressed confliction, frustration and disappointment to various degrees. To cope with such troubling feelings, some journalists and news organizations turned to new approaches of doing journalism,

such as adopting a lighter, brighter style or promoting grass-root initiatives for public interests, and therefore resorted to alternative ways to give meaning to their work.

CHAPTER 9 SOCIAL CONFLICT, EPIDEMIC MISTRUST & NATIONAL COMPARISON

In exploring the journalism culture among metro papers in Kunming, this study thus far has addressed local journalists' working lives, perceptions of their roles and collective identity, journalistic ideals and values, ways those values and ideals might be manifested, and frustrations when such realization fails. Together, these discussions tap the substance and form of the journalism culture under investigation. However, journalism culture does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it is deeply embedded in a social ambiance, perhaps even more so than some other occupations. With the goal of reaching a more profound and comprehensive understanding of Kunming's journalism culture, this chapter examines phenomena of the social, cultural environment that bear importantly on journalists' work.

Given the complexity of any society's institutional and other macro-level constructs, I cannot possibly purport to address all the social and cultural elements that connect and interact with journalism. Rather, this chapter highlights several aspects of the social and cultural environment in contemporary China that emerged from my fieldwork as particularly relevant to journalism, namely, pervasive social conflict, a social pandemic of mistrust, and the Chinese propensity to constantly compare the nation with other countries, particularly Western societies. The following sections address these topics through examples from my fieldwork in combination with additional evidence from scholarship and informed commentary.

Social Conflict

The environment within which Kunming journalists operate is fraught with social conflict, especially those between the powerful and powerless. This is seen first of all in the subject matter of journalistic coverage. Stories of social conflicts of many sorts keep journalists in Kunming busy, with common topics including forced house demolitions,

migrant worker protests demanding back wages, fights between city patrol and illicit street vendors, disputes between patients and hospitals or between customers and service providers, and so on. Below, I offer scenarios from my experiences accompanying reporters.

Teenager Beaten to Death by Security Guards

During the wee hours of October 7, 2011, in a small town on the outskirts of Kunming that was changing from a rural village into a suburb, two teenage boys were suddenly attacked by a group of about 40 men wearing security guard uniforms and wielding steel pipes and wooden sticks. The boys, said to be cousins, had stopped at a small restaurant for a snack following a birthday party they'd attended at a nearby karaoke club (KTV). One of them, a 17-year-old high school student, suffered severe injuries and died soon after being sent to the hospital. The next day, the victim's father set up a memorial for his son in front of the gate of the township government, demanding explanation. Photos of the memorial circulated on weibo and soon drew the attention of local reporters. The security guards were said to be working for the local government, which first said the uniformed men had confused the boys with others, but later refused to confirm that statement, citing on-going police investigation. The township government subsequently told the press the men were security guards hired through an agency.

The following day, I accompanied a reporter going back to the town seeking more details. We arrived in a newspaper vehicle after about an hour's bumpy ride. It seemed a typical place in transition from rural to urban. Shabby stores lined a narrow street covered with a film of dirt, where people, e-bikes and motor vehicles competed with each other in a honking frenzy heedless of traffic rules. Gusts of wind blew up dust that accentuated the chaotic feeling.

Our first stop that afternoon was the local high school, where a giant iron gate barred our way. The reporter was hoping to find the other cousin there. "We are with the

media," he told the guard behind the gate, adding that he wanted to interview someone related to "the incident" two days earlier. The guard responded, "Phone first," and handed a sheet of orange paper with a list of phone numbers of school administrators between the bars of the gate. The reporter called several of the numbers, including that of the principal, but got either no answer or refusal of any interview request, with people citing a police prohibition. The reporter became a bit upset and argued with one of the school officials on the phone, urging the official to allow him to talk to the other cousin in order to get at the truth. The school official hung up. The school gate remained closed.

We then went to the scene of the beating. The little restaurant was locked up, as was the karaoke place across the street. We decided to knock at some doors at a small apartment building behind the restaurant. An old lady in one of the apartments, who happened to be the landlord of the building, said her niece, sleeping in a room facing the street, had heard noises of fighting that night.

The reporter next decided to pay a visit to the victim's home in a nearby village. It was a newly built two-story house, nicely furnished. The boy's father, a skinny, tall country man in his 50s, looked drained and emotionless. He had lost his only child. A huge framed black and white photograph of the victim, the typical funeral portrait, stood in a corner of the living room.. Two young girls were folding paper money into the shape of silver ingots, hundreds of them, which were to be burnt in front of the photo, a traditional way of mourning the dead. A woman reporter from another local paper was there as well.

Two more cousins, also young men, were paying a visit to the family, and we all sat on plastic stools in a circle in the backyard and talked. The reporters discreetly but openly recorded the conversation with iPhones and occasionally took notes. The cousins voiced dissatisfaction toward the township government, criticizing local officials as being irresponsible and trying to avoid responsibility. They condemned local city patrol and insisted that the uniformed men were actually city patrol officers, not contracted outside

security guards. Exactly who had killed the teenager that night, city patrol or security guards, was never clarified in this incident. Hired security were said to often assist city patrol, which only made things more confusing. The press relayed the township government's explanation, but local people believed otherwise.

The young men had quite some stories to tell about how local city patrol bullied people. In one case, they said, city patrol had forcibly torn down one of their homes, and afterwards they came upon the captain of the force at the township government office. The captain baldly admitted to the demolition, and as one of the young men was trying to take a picture of him, the captain warned, "Young man, you're still young. You need to think it through." The cousins saw this as basically a death threat. On the basis of such experiences, they were convinced that city patrol were the real culprits in the killing of their cousin. (October 10, II). By the end of 2011, the father of the victim was still waiting for justice.

City patrol forces have been a hot spot of social conflict in China, because they typically are the ones who demolish old homes to make way for new construction projects, chase away farmers trying to sell home-grown produce in the city streets without permits, and otherwise brutalize ordinary citizens. .During my fieldwork, reporters from newsrooms I was observing covered such events on at least two other occasions.

Migrant Workers Seeking Back Pay

One Friday morning, after repeated hotline calls to the newsroom, a reporter got an assignment to cover a protest by a group of migrant workers demanding back pay. On the street identified as the locale of the protest, we saw a large group of men and women wearing safety helmets and construction clothes, running toward about a dozen minivans. "Maybe that's them," the reporter said. Indeed, right across the street was the object of the protest: Yunnan Road and Bridge Corp, Ltd, a construction company. The steel gate

at the entrance was ostensibly closed, but with one corner bent back to create a two-foot gap where people could crouch through—the migrant workers themselves had made the opening after the company had locked them out. A glass door behind the steel gate was also broken. Inside the lobby, a coffee table was turned upside down, with glass from a table top scattered everywhere, and several broken flower pots along with flowers rooted in soil lay on the floor. Alongside the mess, sitting quietly around a huge oval table and smoking, were representatives of the migrant workers, waiting for leaders from the company to come talk with them.

The reporter interviewed one representative, who said a worker in his 60s had been beaten up by company thugs earlier that day and was now in a nearby hospital. He said the construction company owed millions of yuan in wages for a highway construction project finished a few months before, and that this was the second day they had come to ask for the payment, bringing along about 200 migrant workers to protest, after the company had failed to respond to repeated requests earlier. Asked why they were not going to higher authorities, another representative said this company had people coming to ask for back pay every single day, and some of the cases had been before the authorities for years but had yet to be resolved. “How is it possible that we can wait? School is starting in a few days,” he said. Many of the migrant workers needed money to pay for their children’s tuition and fees. They all spoke the dialect of Chongqing, a city about 550 miles from Kunming.

That afternoon, the reporter I was with paid a visit to the injured migrant worker in the hospital. We found the 61-year-old man in the emergency room, sitting on a wheeled stretcher with an IV hooked up, groaning and vomiting. His face was covered with bruises and scrapes, with a swollen bump on his forehead. The doctor said he had suffered concussion and needed to be hospitalized, so he was about to be transferred to a patient room. The man said he had worked on road construction for about eight months and received not a penny in payment, except for free meals. His wife, who’d helped cook

for workers at the construction site, was also there. She said they needed money for a grandchild's schooling because the child's father, their son, was too ill to work. Like most of the protesting migrant workers, this couple was from Chongqing. The man said staffers from the company had grabbed him and beaten him up as he was coming out of a restroom, and his wife found him lying on the floor bleeding, whereupon fellow workers got him to the hospital.

The reporter helped push the man's stretcher to another building, where he was settled into a room with three other patients. Outside the room, the reporter talked with the man's niece, who had come to the protest to support her uncle. She showed us scratches on her arm and chest, saying some female staffers from the construction company had cursed her, called her names and attacked her while she was standing at the door of their office. "We are all farmers. Those people are just mistreating our farmers," the woman said tearfully. She said the construction company kept "mobs" to beat people up, and wished that Chongqing's police czar Wang Lijun, known for his anti-mob crusading, would handle them—the same Wang Lijun who in February 2012 would pay an unauthorized visit to the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu and triggered the downfall of his boss, then-Chongqing Communist Party head Bo Xilai. Later in the afternoon, when we were back at the demonstration site, the company sent someone to negotiate with the migrant workers and promised to pay back wages in a few days.

Despite spending a whole day reporting, the journalist I accompanied did not think he'd gotten a good story. "It would be good if we could get some deeper stuff. Just what's on the surface is not good," he said. But the construction company's close ties with the government made such the prospect of going deeper unlikely, he added. "And even if we got some stuff, we might not be able to publish it." This wasn't the first time this reporter had covered migrant workers protesting for back pay. "Many companies in China do not have credibility," he said, and owing back payments to workers were common place (August 26).

Dispute between Hospital and Patient

Stories of patient-hospital disputes also arise frequently in Kunming. In one case, a family blaming a hospital for a patient's death resulted in additional hospitalization—the wife and son had encountered a hospital staff member in a park, a fight had broken out, and the son and mother had ended up in the very hospital that they claimed had killed their father and husband. The son and mother said the hospital worker had started the fight in the park, while the hospital staffer pointed the finger right back at the son and mother.

A tipster gave the information to a reporter who I accompanied to the hospital, where we met with the vice president who acted as spokesman. The hospital official spoke in tough and serious tone, starting by mentioning several well-publicized incidents around the country in which patients or their families who claimed to have been mistreated beat up or even killed physicians. He said media coverage of similar events could only lend more ammunition to angry patients and encourage more harm to medical practitioners. More than once, he said, "We recommend that you do not cover this incident." As for the specifics, he accused the son and mother of starting the fight, saying his employee was the victim of two unreasonable, angry family members of a former patient whose death had nothing to do with his hospital. He particularly described the son as anti-government, violent and vicious, saying, "He is 40-something, jobless, divorced. His income is just his parents' retirement salary. You can search his material on the Internet. His web name is Tiandao Changqing [ever-green is the nature's way]. He is a guy who comments on whatever he can grab at." The official said the son had had prior confrontations with police and government while occupying a house that was scheduled to be demolished.

We next visited the son and mother on a ward a few floors below the spokesman's office. The mother was lying on a bed, eyes shut. The son soon walked in. He said he was "self-employed," and that he walked with his mother every Saturday in the park where

the fight took place. The mother said the hospital worker had started it, that the worker's wife also pitched in, pushing her down to the ground and stomping on her chest a couple of times, and that when her son came over to stop the wife, he got into a fight with the husband. A shirt stained with blood was taped to the wall above the son's hospital bed. The mother said she planned to transfer to another hospital for treatment because she could not trust people in this hospital (September 26).

The vast majority of hospitals in China are public institutions, and angry patients or family members finding no channels to voice grievances increasingly turn to extreme actions—blocking the hospital gate, displaying the dead body of a loved one allegedly mistreated in the hospital, even threatening to jump off the hospital building. This kind of incidents has become so common that people have given it a term, *yi nao*, or "hospital disturber," and such incidents appear in media all over China.

In short, Chinese journalists nowadays cannot avoid the realities of social conflict all around them. An unfortunately rich source of stories sometimes causes journalists' misgivings about covering them. A young TV reporter told me she has a hard time chasing down illegal street vendors with camera and microphone, knowing the exposure could threaten these people's livelihoods. "Because of the story, perhaps a child's mother would no longer be able to sell things and then has nothing to eat," this reporter said. Yet sellers without permits are breaking the law, she added, and the dilemma is that "sometimes when we try to adhere to the law we will harm many people" (October 12, III).

The prevalence of social conflict gives many journalists serious pause about the well being of Chinese society. One veteran said, "It feels that media monitoring lags far behind the society's decline." He thinks suppression and exploitation by the powerful against the common people has been worsening (September 18). Such concerns are both a driving force for journalists' aspirations to monitor power, plead for the people, and

make a difference through news coverage, and a source of the profound frustration that generate inner conflict about their work..

Reporters' frequent encounters with social conflict are in line with the dramatic rise of such conflicts in general in Chinese society. After more than three decades of economic development, and despite overall rising living standards, the gap between rich and poor in China has grown alarmingly. Widespread corruption among government and Party officials simply aggravates the disparities between the haves and have-nots. The growing unhappiness among China's dispossessed is evident in rising incidence of protest. In 2003, the government reported 58,000 "mass incidents," and in 2005 the number rose to 74,000 (Guo & Guo, 2008). In a recent survey, the Chinese public expressed growing concerns over inequality and corruption (Pew Research Center, 2012). Chinese president Hu Jingtao's political project of building a "Harmonious Society" (*hexie shehui*), expressed in a set of ideals enshrined in 2007 amendments to the Communist Party's constitution, is in fact further testimony to China's mounting social conflicts. In principle, the Harmonious Society thesis calls for the Party to focus on "resolving issues regarding people's most immediate and practical interests" and to stress "coordinating interests of all sides and resolving social conflicts" (Chinese Communist Party, 2006). Among ordinary people, however, "harmonious society" has become a term more of mockery than ideal, let alone reality, seen as an excuse for pacifying social unrest rather than really bringing benefits to the general public. Journalists ruefully speak of stories that are quashed for political reasons as "being harmonized" (*bei hexie*).

In today's China, new patterns of exclusion and inclusion are forming along the lines of class, ethnicity, region, and the urban-rural division. An alliance among political, economic and intellectual elites has concentrated the greatest rewards of the reforms in the hands of a minority. At the same time, in its efforts to alleviate social tension and maintain hegemony, government and Party rhetoric continues to claim popular legitimacy

(Zhao, 2008). Under such circumstances, Chinese journalists are unlikely to encounter any shortage of social conflict stories in the near future.

The Pandemic of Mistrust

A commonality of most social conflicts journalists encounter in their work is the salience of mistrust—lack of trust between individuals, as well as between individuals and institutions. Media reports and scholarly analyses indicate that such mistrust is endemic across Chinese society. Consumers have long been wary of counterfeit merchandise and adulterated food products. Common folks have gotten into the habit of thinking pretty much all government officials are corrupt to some degree and negligent of people's well being. Patients seeking hospital care assume doctors will not treat them unless they hand over red envelopes of cash. Hospitals, in turn, doubt that patients will pay their bills, and charge large deposits prior to admission.

Journalists are party to mistrust as well, not only as an ingredient in stories they cover, but also in their own interactions with authorities and their feelings about the dynamics of Chinese society.

Mistrust between Common People and Authorities

In the earlier case of migrant workers seeking back pay, an atmosphere of mistrust surrounded the entire incident. The road and bridge construction company, said to have close ties with the government, had breached the workers' trust when it failed to pay wages guaranteed by contract. The workers did not trust the company itself, nor labor authorities, to redress the wrong and thus turned to protest. When company thugs beat up a worker, other workers naturally did not trust the police officer who arrived to investigate, and the details of their interactions with her illuminate how entrenched such mistrust has become.

A protest leader who assumed the officer would automatically side with the company accused her of receiving a 20,000 yuan payoff from the company, which the

officer denied. Still, protesters continued to complain to the officer that she was not on the side of the people although her salary came from the people's tax money. The officer insisted that she was just doing her job, without favoring any side, and that she actually sympathized with the workers and thought they had the right to request their pay.

The workers also mistrusted the company's eventual capitulation, and an oral agreement would not suffice. When an executive finally delivered the message that the company had decided to pay the workers, the workers' representatives insisted that the man write it down, imprint the document with the company seal, and give a copy to local labor authorities (August 26).

The mistrust, of course, was part of the reason for news coverage—and the reporter I accompanied himself had mistrust toward the company, thinking it might try to prevent coverage. So the reporter did not identify himself to the company executive present at the negotiations. He did not even ask for a business card from the executive or obtain the executive's full name, and used only his surname in the story.

In the case of the teenager beaten to death by a group of security guards, reporters knew the victim's father had set up a memorial at the local government offices because he did not trust the government to take the issue seriously without media attention (October 11, II). And the local authorities' handling of the case only worsened the mistrust. One reporter covering the story called the government response "nonsense," observing that the press conference ostensibly held to explain the beating lasted only five minutes, and consisted of local officials reading a press release but taking no questions. "For things like this, [the government] should shoulder whatever responsibility it should shoulder, deal with it with due process. The government is always trying to evade its responsibility and therefore has lost public trust," the reporter said (October 10, II). As for the two cousins who talked with reporters later, their mistrust toward the local government was only too obvious.

In another case, a reporter followed up a lead from a candidate for a government post who had passed a written exam and interview stage but been disqualified after a physical, the last step in the recruiting process. In public perceptions, many people believe getting a government job often depends more on personal relations than on knowledge, skills and capability, and in this case the applicant himself suspected unfairness. The reporter conducted an interview with an official at the government recruiting office, who seemed candid in her responses. She showed documents indicating the candidate had kidney problems and did not meet government health standards for new recruits. The reporter told the official that some people thought perhaps the applicant did not have the correct *guanxi*, or connections. The official laughed and went on to explain the recruiting process, emphasizing that there was little room for cheating. The reporter continued to mention the element of mistrust, while the official claimed there was no hanky-panky. "The health standard is there, the process is open and transparent, and there is no foul play in any single step. [The scenario of] disqualifying one person in order to save the spot for another does not exist," the official said (September 16). But without the automatic assumptions of malfeasance produced by mistrust, the reporter would not have followed up the applicant's suspicions in the first place.

People's assumptions are constantly reinforced by experience. One reporter told me that four criminally charged refugees came to her for help turning themselves over to the authorities because they were worried they would not succeed on their own. Indeed, the reporter understood their concerns, because she had witnessed occasions when people wanted to surrender to the police and were told "Come back another day." "Unbelievable," the reporter called it (October 8, I).

People's mistrust toward government officials and other authorities is often what drives them to seek help from the media. People think "journalists can do more than authorities," a veteran reporter said. The fact that newspaper stories often rouse outpourings of public assistance is another indicator of mistrust, he added. "That people

are willing to donate money to newspapers shows they trust newspapers, trust journalists, but not the Red Cross" (October 16).

Mistrust between Journalists and Authorities

Journalists' suspicions toward authorities are an important element in undercover reporting. Journalists covering sensitive stories anticipate that if they try to obtain information openly, authorities will intervene, sometimes forcefully, or sources will lie for fear of punishment. The authorities, on the other hand, have little trust in journalists, often seeing them as adversaries—even though a great deal of the reporting about officials and official matters is positive.

An investigative reporter told me about going to a rural town to investigate two teenagers' deaths in a coal mine. People stopped her and her photographer en route to the mine and took them to the township government office. "They kept asking us to drink water, kept delaying [our coverage]. We asked them to tell us about the situation, and they said no, that we had to wait for the township chief," the reporter said. Local officials finally said the two teenagers had entered the mine by themselves and suffocated, and the deaths were an accident. The reporter and photographer then insisted on going to the boys' home village about a 10-kilometer walk away, and the local officials followed them. "I don't even know where I got the willpower [to walk that far]," the reporter recalled. She and her colleague finally threw off their tail by walking faster, and reached the teenagers' homes at 10:30 that night. The family confirmed that the teenagers had gone to explore the coal mine by themselves, and said the government already had offered them compensation. In other words, the incident indeed appeared to be an accident.

At 1 o'clock in the morning, local government officials invited the two journalists for a very late dinner, after which one official summoned the reporter to an office upstairs and gave her a thick envelope. "I estimated there was 10,000 to 20,000 yuan in it." she

said. She called the photographer up to join her, and both refused the money. “I told them I cannot accept this kind of money that involves death,” the reporter said. She knew the officials were worried about their image, and she told them to “please trust our ethics and morality.” The township officials nevertheless were upset at the rejection, and then and there had the journalists driven to the county seat, which oversees the township. The next day, the county Party secretary invited the two journalists to a meal and explained that people in that locality had not seen a reporter for many years and were afraid coverage would cost them their positions (October 25). Clearly, the township government officials had little faith in the integrity of news media and journalists.

Similar fears also underlie the common practice among government officials of giving only a family name when answering journalists’ questions, to make any repercussions of “bad stories” and ensuing troubles easier to evade. Kunming metro papers thus are full of references to sources such as Mr. Zhang or Ms. Wang. Many stories also use anonymous sources, vague mentions of locations, and other blurred facts. One reporter said he uses people’s full names about half the time (September 23, I). Another said most of the time he uses only surnames, usually at sources’ request (October 8, II). Another gave an example. Working on a story about road flooding after heavy rain, the reporter called someone at the agency for flood control and referred to the source as “Mr. Zhang” in the story, because Mr. Zhang would not give his full name. When the reporter asked for Zhang’s title, the man said he did not have one. Journalists are familiar with such encounters with officials afraid of getting into trouble. “If the reporter didn’t write something good, then it would be his responsibility,” this reporter said (September 23, I).

Mistrust between Journalists and the Disadvantaged

Lack of trust even pervades journalists’ attitudes toward the very groups journalists say they typically try to help. “You cannot trust people blindly,” said a

supervisor. “Chinese people are too smart and have too many tricks. Some people may use your sympathy. So you need to learn to discern and be a smart journalist” (September21). Indeed, many of his colleagues related experiences of being misled by the very people with whom they sympathized.

A photographer, for example, once tried to help a teenage girl from an extremely poor rural family find means to go to school. His coverage soliciting public support generated donations of more than 80,000 yuan. The photographer set up an account for the girl at her village bank branch, allocating a monthly allowance for school costs. Before long, the girl decided she did not want to go to school anymore and asked the photographer, who had sole control of the account, for money to do some business. She also traveled from her village to Kunming to look for work. The photographer sent her home, but she showed up again “You once knelt down in front of me, holding onto my leg, begging me to help you to go to school,” the photographer recalled telling her. “Now you have school to go to, and you don’t attend, but instead come here to work. I told her I didn’t want to have anything to do with her anymore. I had the feeling of my conscience being stomped upon” (October 16).

Another reporter described her disappointment with a man who had asked for help in a dispute with a hospital. “I felt the patient was very pitiable. My heart softened,” she said. The story was published, and the next day, the hospital labeled it fabrication and phoned the reporter repeatedly to curse and threaten her. She had gone to the hospital twice during her reporting and officials there had refused to do interviews. She had not recorded her interviews supporting the story. And now the patient was nowhere to be found anymore. “My supervisor speculated that the hospital had given some money to the patient for him to keep his mouth shut. His purpose was just money,” the reporter said. “This incident chilled my heart. That patient, I thought he was so pitiable, so disadvantaged, but once he reached his object, he kicked me away…. I felt it was so not worth it” (September 27,II). A veteran journalist said when dealing with requests from

the disadvantaged, he will not proceed unless he can verify the information provided. "Often what we face is just claims from one side," he said. "What exactly is the truth? … I have to verify independently" (September 23, II).

Thus results a cycle of mistrust: Common folks, including disadvantaged people, do not trust the authorities, so they appeal to the media, especially market-oriented outlets like the metro papers, for help. Journalists at these outlets usually have little faith in the authorities, sharing the public perceptions to a degree. The authorities, in turn, doubt of journalists, regarding them as anti-government crusaders or corruptible individuals who care more about money than ethics and integrity—and in fact, past reports about journalists taking bribes from sources seeking positive coverage have hurt the occupation's reputation (Zha, 1995; Zhao, 1998), although I did not observe or learn of such practices in the context of my fieldwork. Journalists also have become wary of common folks who plead with them for help. As demonstrated in my examples, such widespread mistrust underpins many stories, behaviors and practices. It also puts the nerve system of the entire society on high alert, creating a very sensitive social environment that makes for both exciting stories and tough challenges.

Trust in systems or institutions may be understood as confidence or faith in the reliability of the systems or institutions to work the way they are supposed to and deliver desirable outcomes (Giddens, 1990; Li, 2004). People are likely to trust, and more likely to think positively about, the state or public institutions that perform as expected (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Yang & Tang, 2010). When public trust toward authorities and institutions are low, one can infer that their performance has fallen short of public expectations. This is the case in China.

A recent episode that underscores the issue is the so-called Guo Meimei controversy that raged across the Internet and in the news media in mid-2011. The 19-year-old Guo Meimei, a young woman whose mother had made a fortune through stock trading, boasted about her wealth, with photos of her luxury cars, top brand hand bags

and much else, and identified herself as an administrator for the Red Cross Society of China. Outrage spread through reposts and comments, with people interpreting her extravagant lifestyle as evidence of corruption in the Red Cross. As it turned out, Guo had no real association with the organization. She said she had claimed the affiliation out of vanity (Wang & Chen, 2011). But by then, her online bragging and lying had thoroughly undermined public trust in the Red Cross, and donations to the organization plunged. Efforts at image repair were of little use. Statements, clarifications, explanations, arguments and a major report (Beijing Morning Post, 2012) could not shake public perceptions that the organization was corrupt.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of this episode is that criticism focused not on the bored, vain rich girl herself. Rather, people assumed her claims were true and directed their anger and denunciations at the Red Cross. In other words, people chose to give credit to a teenager out of nowhere over a 100-year-old, well-known, state sanctioned national organization. To put it another way, the public was not so much willing to believe a young woman as ready to doubt the Red Cross. In this controversy, the Red Cross was a stand-in representing the entire state apparatus. It presented to the Chinese public a rare opportunity, a convenient target upon which to vent their long-held, staggering mistrust and dissatisfaction toward the authorities.

By the same token, during the trial of Gu Kailai, the wife of disgraced politician Bo Xilai, netizens rapidly spread suspicions that the woman appearing on TV and in news photos as the defendant was not really Ms. Gu, who would be convicted of murdering a British businessman. The widespread belief was that the woman in court was a body- double (Wu, 2012). Apparently the public just did not trust the purportedly open trial to really be open.

National Comparison

We already have seen that many Kunming journalists are disheartened about many things in China, from the political system to people's livelihoods. An element of this criticism not yet discussed is its flip side: journalists' admiration of the West and constant comparisons between China and foreign countries. The term "overseas" (*guo wai*), which in regular Chinese parlance refers to developed, democratic Western countries and occasionally advanced industrial countries in Asia such as Japan and Korea, came up frequently in journalists' conversations and in my interviews. This collective concept of an often superior system abroad provides a comparative framework these journalists use to evaluate social reality in China and the performance of Chinese institutions and authorities.

In one conversation, a journalist said he had been shocked to learn that in the U.S. people can drink directly from the water tap, and declared, "Here, even if you buy bottled water, you would suspect whether it is fake" (October 11, I). Another journalist, irritated that stories authored by his colleagues were posted on Yunnan Net, the portal of the provincial Party organ *Yunnan Daily*, without crediting the paper of origin, asserted: "Bestseller writers in the U.S. can buy a big house in New York City. Not gonna' happen in China. China doesn't protect the cultural industry, writers or intellectual property" (October 11, II).

I was in a Kunming newsroom following the death of Steve Jobs. During a lunch break, as journalists expressed admiration for him, a discussion of why China did not have its own Steve Jobs emerged. The conversation included condemnation of China's rigid educational methods, the convention of looking down upon people without higher education, and the culture of suppressing and punishing kids who think and act differently from others (October 8, II).

And Kunming journalists frequently mention *The New York Times*, and even the *Huffington Post*, as representing higher standards of journalism than China's media

provide. It is clear that such domestic vs. overseas (*guo nei* vs. *guo wai*) comparisons shape their views of their work, even though their mental images of other countries often are more myth than reality.

Journalists often commented that Chinese media are not free while Western media enjoy freedom. A supervisor talking about his values as a journalist said: "No one media organization is absolutely neutral. Being neutral is relative. Trying to maintain as much neutrality as possible is desirable. But media in China are totally controlled by a political party. Foreign media, although more or less influenced by political parties, feel like independent institutions" (September 21). Another journalist asserted that the U.S. muckrakers of the olden days faced far less dire conditions than Chinese investigative journalists today. Indeed, perceptions of the foreign often are based on vague impressions and amount to little more than "feels like," but seem to be sufficient for voicing strong opinions.

Similarly, journalists refer to Western political systems and politicians as a mirror to show up an ugly image of China's political system and politicians. Chinese media paid fervent attention to the new U.S. Ambassador Gary Locke when he first arrived in China, noting admiringly that he flew coach and ate simply. A chief editor explained this as a reflection of Chinese people's dislike of officials and general antipathy toward those with means, saying, "In China, government officials are the privileged stratus, which leads to hatred toward the powerful and the rich. Americans do not hate the rich. They respect people who build something from nothing. Many rich people in China made their wealth through illegal approaches and collusion with the authorities. Therefore in China, wealth is a sensitive topic" (October 18, II).

Comparison of political systems between China and Western countries often aggravates journalists' dissatisfaction with the Chinese government. A young reporter commenting on the handling of the Wenzhou train collision said: "In this country, under such a system, the government's attitude in dealing with disasters will be unsatisfactory.

During the Wenzhou train collision, [the government decided to] bury the train cars on the site. Compare [such handling] with how Britain and France handled [similar train collision in their countries], how they searched for bodies and handled belongings of the victims; how Japan searched for bodies and handled belongings of the victims after the tsunami [in 2011]. It has been 10 years since September 11, but the United States is still searching for and identifying victims. The Chinese government just tried to get it over with as soon as possible, forcing victim's families to sign [compensation agreements]" (September 21).

An investigative journalist told me about reporting on heavy pollution emitted by a chemical plant built near Dianchi Lake, a large freshwater lake whose quality has been severely degraded in recent decades. The plant owner was a Korean businessman, and the reporter asked what his government would do if a highly polluting chemical plant was built near a major lake in Korea. The owner told her those responsible would face criminal charges and heavy sentences. Environmental plans actually call for restricting further industry around Dianchi Lake. "What was our government thinking? I don't know," the reporter said (September 26, II).

Hollywood movies sometimes enter into China-overseas comparisons. A chief editor said he once used "The Shawshank Redemption" in teaching staff reporters and editors about storytelling skills, but the movie about an unjustly imprisoned man taught him much more. "What struck me most about this movie is that when a person encountered injustice… he finally fled to paradise relying on his personal wisdom and efforts. As for China, maybe each every one of us is locked up in a prison like this, but very, very few people could flee to paradise relying on their own efforts" (September 18). Another chief editor mentioned "The Social Network" to express his admiration that an American with an idea for business or innovation can just go ahead and put it into practice without government interference (July 20).

When it comes to digital transformation of media, journalists in this study extol the example of United States. Even before I started my work at one of the newspapers, I was asked to give a lecture to on new media development in the U.S., to which about 50 people showed up, including the chief editor and a few executives. Their many questions showed their intense curiosity about U.S. media and their eagerness to learn from what they deemed a much more advanced system (July 21). The same chief editor, speaking to a room full of reporters and editors about his paper's new media efforts, criticized what he saw as Chinese journalism education's failure to keep up with global trends. "Countries overseas are actively training new media talent, and our country is still teaching Marxist views of journalism," he said (August 23).

Perhaps more significant is seeming appropriation of American journalistic values. One chief editor said, "Metro papers are the typical example of the mixture of Chinese and American values" (September 13). To him, the American part is being a watchdog, speaking for the people and promoting basic human rights, while the Chinese part emphasizes the legitimacy of the authorities and virtues of social stability. The chief editor of another newspaper said that among the values he tries to propagate in his newsroom are "political democratization, economic marketization, and cultural diversification." He further described these values as shared by "countries that are rich and democratic, with sufficient protection of human rights," and China obviously is not one of them (September 18).

The idea of "universal values" for society seems to find favor in Kunming newsrooms, at least in internal discussion. At one meeting I attended, a chief editor first told his editors and executives not to use the term freely, because Chinese leaders would deem it the "spread of American values." But then he continued, "The core of universal values is the guarantee of people's basic rights. China's problem is lack of guarantee for people's basic rights. The Party does not mention universal values, because mentioning it means to share power and interests with the people. Lack of universal values leads to

hatred toward the authorities and the rich." But he reiterated that journalists should be "cautious" in using the term, adding, "This is the red line." He mentioned that a scholar who had criticized the poor condition of universal values in China on the Internet was soon denounced by netizens as a U.S. spy. "This shows the society is very sensitive right now," the chief editor said. A small paper in Southwest China that is not a player on China's major political stage should be all the more restrained about promoting ideas like universal values, he said, but added that, "Local news needs to show some values," just not to label them as "universal values" (September 13).

The salience of American values emerged in a different way in coverage of the 10th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks, when many Chinese papers published multipage supplements. This is a common practice for local papers in signifying or commemorating major events, and they compete with each other in packaging, volume and content of such supplements. Kunming newspaper supplements on the anniversary of 9-11 were no less extravagant than treatment of major domestic anniversaries. All four local metros published a special insert of around 16 pages with color photos, fancy graphics and lengthy stories, many translations from U.S. media, with accounts of or about victims, survivors and families as well as commentary and analysis from American journalists, politicians and experts, and so on. As such, these supplements largely consisted of American stories, emotions and points of view. No wonder one chief editor called the local coverage of the anniversary "more American than America."

"Metro papers…want to distance themselves from Party organs, are resistant to government requests, and admire the media environment in the U.S.," this editor said. "The 9-11 coverage is a bizarre product of China's media. We do not care about our own stuff, and are not allowed to care. This kind of environment pushes Chinese media toward American values." He mentioned *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932-1972*, by William Manchester, saying every single chief editor at the

Kunming metro papers has a copy of the Chinese edition, published in 2006 (October 18, II).

Kunming journalists' readiness to denounce the Chinese while extolling the Western actually reflects a longstanding cultural propensity. Modern Chinese history generally is dated from the start of the first Opium War in 1840 (Hutchings, 2001; King, 1967; Tong, 2000), when Qing Dynasty troops succumbed to British warships and bombing. The Opium Wars forced China "to come to terms with the new international order created by free trade and industrial revolution in the West" (Hutchings, 2001, p. 141). This history set the tone for China's modernization efforts in the century to come. The Qing regime purchased Western weapons and machinery and tried to adapt Western technology, but with little reform of political, economic and social institutions, let alone cultural values and world views. Late Qing elites subscribed to "Chinese learning as *Ti*, Western learning as *Yong*," meaning anything Western was merely the "tool" while Chinese values and culture were the "essence" to be maintained (Tong, 2000). Efforts to establish modern social institutions such as schools and banks came later and more slowly. Pressure for change in the cultural sphere culminated in the May Fourth Movement of 1919, when some Chinese intellectuals called for abandoning Confucian doctrines and their rigid social rules and conservative values, instead promoting new ideas of science and democracy (Tong, 2000). Some of the activists were Western-educated, and some would go on to help found the Chinese Communist Party. Their new culture movement helped erode the old value system without supplying a clear alternative, although the communists adopted Marxism, a European import (King, 1967; Schurman, 1968).

Over the last century and more, therefore, modernists frequently pitted traditional Chinese culture against Western culture, casting the former as outdated, reactionary and detrimental to the nation and the latter as advanced and progressive. For much of the history of the People's Republic, the Chinese Communist Party emphasized self-reliance,

sought a particularly Chinese path to socialism and otherwise rejected Westernization, and in the post-Mao period the Party remains wary of Western influences, particularly in the political realm. Nowadays, however, the official Party insistence on "Chinese characteristics" has become something of a joke in the public eye. People use the term mockingly in reference to a wide range of negative social phenomena in China, from government corruption, food adulteration and counterfeit products to suppression of expression. The view emerges in newsroom conversations as well. By contrast, Western countries and their media, however vague or mythical they may be in Chinese people's minds, are upheld as the standard against which to judge China's political system, media freedom, social justice, and so on. Journalists are mostly gloomy about how China stacks up, but their disappointment and dissatisfaction also help motivate their desire for change. Meanwhile, they remain caught in between aspirations and the frustrations, agonized and conflicted, which, in turn, affects the way they give meaning to their work.

Another major aspect of global influence, of course, is the introduction of new information technology in China (McCormick & Liu, 2003). Digital technologies and the Internet are producing important changes in journalists' professional lives, to be explored further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 10 NEW MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

At a dinner gathering in a restaurant where I first met the deputy chief editor and a group of journalists from one of Kunming's metro papers, I was a bit stunned to see every single individual at the table holding an iPhone 4, the newest model back then. I was the only one using an old-fashioned dumb cell phone. When the deputy chief editor and I started chatting, the first topic of conversation was the Chinese microblogging system *weibo*. He advised me to open an account (July 19).

My notions about microblogging at the point conjured up Twitter, which to me was mainly a conduit for updates about trivial details of personal life such as what you ate for breakfast or your pet's cute trick. I would soon come realize that weibo is much more. As the most popular social media format in China now, weibo functions as a public forum for disseminating and discussing public issues of a broad range, including current news, providing a venue for opinions and information not available on traditional media. I opened a weibo account a few days later.

Working with journalists in Kunming had me surrounded by iPhones and weibo activity. Editors look at their devices during editors meetings, reporters use them to record interviews or to take goofy photos of their colleagues in the newsroom for posting on weibo, photographers use them to shoot pictures or videos at scenes where they do not want to use obtrusive big cameras, and so on. Nearly every single reporter or editor I interacted with had a weibo account, and they checked their accounts incessantly—during meetings, while waiting to be served at a restaurant or sitting in a Karaoke club listening to colleagues belt their lungs out. Many reporters actually have two cell phones, an older one that still harbors a roster of sources, and the more versatile iPhone.

And there are other digital essentials, as indicated by a question I was commonly asked: "What is your QQ number?" I quickly realized that in the journalistic community, the QQ online instant chatting tool could be more important than an e-mail address. Most

of the business cards journalists gave me listed QQ numbers with other contact information. The system was developed by Chinese web engineers. The actual QQ number is a series of six to eleven randomly generated digits assigned to a registered QQ user. Everybody I encountered with a QQ number seemed to remember it, despite the total randomness and lack of any helpful pattern, although I never managed to memorize mine. Among Kunming journalists, QQ was the channel for sending stories, photos and other materials back and forth as well as for calling meetings, contacting sources, and conducting interviews, and also was widely used for mere chit-chat, exchanging jokes, and the like.

A colleague at a desk behind me while I was working for one of the paper's website often sent me QQ messages about work rather than walking a few steps to my desk, or simply talking. He may have wanted to keep our conversation private, but the more likely explanation was that he was just too used to using QQ. The head of the website operation, sitting in an office on the other side of the huge warehouse floor, pretty much relies on QQ to run his department, sending instructions, requests and questions, occasionally summoning someone to "come over for a minute" and appear in person in his office. E-mail seems obsolete in this context, and is used only when QQ is not available. The preferred method is faster, supports instant two-way communication, and allows multiple conversations at the same time.

Neither can these journalists live without texting, spurred by the fact that China's mobile companies charge much less for texting than for phone calls. During my three months in Kunming, I received more than 100 text messages, and I sent out a similar volume. By Chinese standards I'm not a voluminous texter, but texting was essential to work and leisure alike, for making appointments, contacting editors and sources, giving and receiving story assignments, sending news tips, and simple exchanges of questions and answers. My initial interview with a chief editor I had never met before was set up entirely though texting.

In short, I found technology—smart phones and other digital devices, web browsing and profuse use of social media, you name it—to be ubiquitous both inside and outside Kunming's newsrooms. Inevitably, new media tools and methods are having an impact on journalistic practices and the ways journalists find meaning in their work. These new influences and their manifestations and implications are the focus of this chapter.

The Wenzhou Train Collision

The night of July 23, 2011, the area around the city of Wenzhou was drenched by thunderstorms. Near Shuangyu, a viaduct channeling high speed train tracks over a valley was barely visible in the pitch dark. At around 8:30 p.m., bright light suddenly tore apart the darkness—not more lightning, but an enormous crash—one high speed train colliding into the rear of another. Together, these two trains were carrying more than 1500 passengers. Several cars derailed and plunged off the viaduct, hitting the ground; one was left dangling over the bridge. At least 40 people were killed in the accident, and hundreds more injured.

Going simply by casualties, the 7.23 train collision was not the most horrific accident in China's recent history, but its social impact was enormous. A recent *New Yorker* account by Evan Osnos (2012) provides an excellent explanation of how and why this is so. And the role of social media in the episode and its aftermath proved pivotal, for it was the microblog system weibo that transformed the occasion into a public crusade against the negligence, arrogance and dishonesty of the Chinese government, particularly the powerful Railway Ministry. The controversy simultaneously further illuminated one of China's fundamental social conflicts: the country's relentless pursuit of economic growth at the price of common people's wellbeing. For Chinese media, the experience also affirmed how important new technology has become in the conduct of journalism.

In fact, weibo took the stage even before the accident occurred. Seven minutes before the crash, a weibo user on one of the trains posted about the thunderstorm and said the train was "crawling more slowly than a snail" (Bao, 2011). Four minutes after the collision, a passenger on the train coming along behind that ran into the other, sent out the first word of the collision via weibo: "D301 had an accident in Wenzhou. Suddenly stopped, with strong strike. Twice! All power is out!" This post appeared on the Internet two hours before the first breaking news item on the collision released by mainstream news media (Xinhua Net, 2011). Meanwhile, weibo posts calling for help, seeking information about passengers, updating the situation on the scene, and so on were flooding the weibo system.

In the following days, as such posts continued, more and more people—common folks, victims, families, scholars, journalists, celebrities—chimed in and expanded the discourse to question the cause of the accident, criticize the government responses, praise Wenzhou volunteers helping with the rescue efforts, speculate about corruption, and cast doubts over China's entire development strategy. Photos contributed by common people were abundant—of the wreckage, of victims and rescuers, of volunteers lining up to donate blood. A video of the moment of the collision even appeared on weibo (Bao, 2011; Huo & Lai, 2011). By noon of July 24, the number of weibo posts about the accident carried by Sina, the biggest weibo operator, surpassed three million (Xinhua Net, 2011).

One of the most widely circulated items came from columnist Tong Dahuan, whose plea has become the classic statement of the collision's core significance: "China, please go a little more slowly. Please stop your running steps, wait for your people, wait for your soul, wait for your morality, and wait for your conscience. Do not let trains derail, bridges collapse, roads turn into traps, buildings become dangerous. Go a bit slowly, and allow every life to have freedom and dignity, every person not to be left behind by this era, and everybody to reach their destination safely." Within 24 hours, this

comment was reposted more than 280,000 times and drew more than 30,000 additional comments (Tong, 2011). It was also quoted in a *New York Times* story on the collision (Johnson, 2011).

The weibo commotion over the collision could not escape notice of journalists working for traditional media. At one of the Kunming newsrooms I was observing, the accident of Saturday along with weibo reaction and news coverage constituted the central preoccupation of the regular editorial meeting on the following Monday. The chief editor had prepared a PowerPoint presentation titled, "Behind the News: Weibo's Push." He said his newspaper had relied heavily on weibo for its first day of coverage of the collision, and then identified and discussed five dimensions of weibo's impact on coverage, as follows:

- "Speed" (*sudu*). Weibo was two hours ahead of news media in breaking the news of the collision.
- "Temperature" (*wendu*). Learning about the accident on weibo, thousands of Wenzhou people flocked to the scene and waited in line in the summer heat to have their blood drawn at donation stations. Locals who came to the rescue before troops arrived took the injured to hospitals in their own vehicles. While China Central Television's (CCTV) coverage of the response was mostly about the troops and government reactions, local people's initiative deserved the limelight, according to the chief editor., "This is the light of humanity, the warmth of Wenzhou people, and the hope of China, not the troops, not the Zhejiang government, not Hu-Wen," he said—the latter being a reference to central leaders Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao.
- "Attitude" (*taidu*).The chief editor showed a widely circulated weibo photo juxtaposing the front pages of four major Party newspapers on July 24, the day after the accident, with that of *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, a market oriented tabloid in Guangzhou. The party organs—*People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily*,

Economic Daily and *People's Liberation Army Daily*—look nearly identical and have the same lead story and photo, about a Central Military Commission ceremony honoring newly promoted generals. Not a word about the train collision appears on these front pages. The *Southern Metropolitan Daily,* in contrast, features a photo of the crashed trains and derailing cars taking up two-thirds of the front page, with a bold, large font headline that reads "High speed trains collide in Wenzhou; Four cars fall off bridge." The chief editor also projected weibo posts demanding that those responsible for the accident be held to account. On one of the slides, the chief editor added his own assessment: "This kind of harsh questioning and serious attitude is the morality and conscience that Chinese citizens should have."

- "Range" (*guangdu*). The chief editor highlighted the breadth and volume of information posted on weibo in the couple of days following the collision. He marveled that the sheer amount of information available on weibo far surpassed that purveyed by regular news media. He pointed out that many of the photos taken on the scene and posted on weibo, including pictures of the railway minister holding a press conference in an air-conditioned train car and the long line of volunteers waiting in the heat to donate blood, were absent from traditional media.
- "Depth" (*shendu*). Weibo discussion went considerably beyond the accident *per se* and highlighted a fundamental conflict in Chinese society: the contradictions emerging from the government's aggressive pursuit of GDP growth while neglecting common people's wellbeing. The chief editor incorporated Tong Dahuan's comment into this section.

After the presentation, the chief editor urged people at the meeting to pay more attention to weibo, not just as a source of information but as an inspiration to change their values about news. He also encouraged his colleagues to be braver in expressing their

opinions, on weibo as well as in the paper. “Try not to let Sina close your account,” he said, referring to the mandatory monitoring the government expects from Internet service providers, “but at the same time take advantage of freedom of speech” (July 25).

In short, this editor lauded weibo as setting an example for his newspaper to follow on many dimensions. Inspired and emboldened by this example, Kunming journalists sought to explore new approaches to news coverage, breaking away from the traditional practice in crisis situations of focusing on statements and actions of leaders and other authorities, and instead paying more attention to victims and ordinary people’s reactions. The weibo effect also emerged in journalists’ hard questions about causes and handling of the incident, and in greater outspokenness of strong opinions.

The influence of weibo on traditional media triggered by the train collision was no flash in the pan. It endured in the newsroom through the remainder of my fieldwork, and emerged constantly in newsroom meetings and conversations. At the same paper in a meeting a week after the accident, on August 1, the chief editor mentioned a *China Youth Daily* article on the train collision that he said his reporters should emulate. Instead of sticking to the “fact-plus-background-plus-expert comments” format, which he called “1990s style,” this article personalized the episode. Headlined “A Train That Never Arrived” and published in the national paper’s supplement *Freezing Point,* it focused on two college students who had died, one in each of the collided trains. The profiles detailed the activities of both young people, including their communications with friends, from right before boarding the trains through the last moments of their lives (Zhao, 2011). This was in marked contrast with state media, particularly major outlets like CCTV, which continued to adhere to conventional disaster coverage, highlighting national leaders’ instructions, government organized rescue and military relief activities. With its emphasis on individuals—passengers, victims, and their loved ones—the *China Youth Daily* story may or may not have been inspired by the trend on weibo, but it certainly concurred with the weibo ethos.

At the same meeting, the chief editor brought up a local story about two buses colliding, in which bus passengers were quoted as saying the drivers had not tried to save people. To the editor, this echoed a weibo post right after the Wenzhou train collision saying no train staff were around to help the passengers. “Local reporters should see their own direction from the coverage of the train collision,” he said (August 1).

More than a month later, on September 13, this chief editor again mentioned the train collision at an editorial meeting, in connection with his paper’s coverage of a ferryboat sinking in Hunan. Nine middle school students and three adults had drowned in the boat accident, and the paper’s story had raised questions about how and why it came about. Still, the chief editor thought the coverage was too timid, and suggested the role of government failings deserved harsher treatment and that his staff should have followed more closely “the train coverage approach” (September 13).

This editor’s counterpart at another local paper also recognized weibo’s long-term impact on traditional media in the wake of the train collision, telling me that newspaper coverage style already had changed a lot following the train collision. “Given the pressure of broad public opinion on weibo,” papers “had to solidify their status” in the realm of “selling opinions and attitudes,” he said. Referring to a special issue on the train collision published by *Southern Metropolitan Daily* and titled “Truth is the best commemoration,” he said, “Would you say it is coverage of facts? Not really. I therefore think that if you are just providing facts, and your facts are not more or faster than new media, especially weibo, you will have a hard time competing with them.” His conclusion? “For print media, in the future, an important product will be commentaries, or news with opinion,” although he cautioned against too much opinion and insisted that news still needs to be based on facts (September 18).

In short, a new social media form in China, weibo, was an important catalyst and change agent in Kunming newspaper coverage of the Wenzhou train collision. Besides being a major source of information, weibo conveyed priorities, attitudes and values very

different from those emphasized in mainstream state media, inspiring journalists at Kunming metro papers to likewise challenge conventions and test limits. This case illustrates the powerful influence the Internet and new media can exert upon traditional journalism and journalists.

New Information Sources

My conversations and newsroom observations made it clear that the Internet is now a major source of story ideas for journalists. One young reporter said half of his stories derive from the Internet, including from leads on weibo and discussion forums. This reporter also employs weibo to further spread the word and generate greater attention for certain stories. “I see myself as a reporter of the Internet age,” he said (October 8, II). A reporter who covers police, courts and local government said consulting weibo regularly is now a must, and that he browses through weibo posts for 30 minutes at a time at least twice a day (August 8). More experienced reporters also are on board. One who said he only learned to type in 2000 uses weibo to find story ideas and enjoys expressing opinions and exchanging views through weibo (October 12, II). A supervisor confessed to having some kind of weibo anxiety syndrome, in that he feels compelled to check weibo all the time for fear that he has missed something significant. And I could not help but note a night editor’s repetitive refrain during a nighttime budget meeting: “on weibo, it says…”; “on weibo, I saw…” (August 17).

To give an example, at about 3p.m. one day, a web editor excitedly announced breaking news—release of a provincial government report on furniture purchases for the Yunnan Party Academy, a training institute for Party officials. The report, intended to show openness about government purchases, said the institute had spent more than 11 million yuan (about US$ 1.75 million) on furniture. Already, postings on weibo were calling this lavish spending and suggesting such amounts could be better spent on other uses, such as sending poor children to school. A weibo post about the matter by an

executive from another local paper whom the web editor followed, and reposted by many others, had drawn the web editor's attention. He traced the information back to the government website where the report had appeared, and then alerted the reporters' department. It turned out they already knew about it. He and a reporter then communicated on QQ about how to conduct interviews and produce stories for both the newspaper and the website (August 9).

Pushing the Limits and Expanding Impact

With dissatisfaction and criticism toward the authorities appearing on Internet channels in a magnitude rarely seen in traditional media, journalists who are heavy Internet users—and most are—sometimes cannot help joining the trend of testing limits. The experiments and innovations are not necessarily dramatic, but they can change or add to news coverage in important ways.

One of Kunming's local papers decided two years ago to devote an entire page every day to stories from the Internet, including forum discussions, weibo comments, or reports on controversies being debated online. In this way, the paper can disseminate topics and opinions that otherwise might not appear. The purpose of the page, according to its editor, is "to expand the range of speech." A regular news account about a government official's talk, for instance, will be straightforward. But if anything the official said offended the public, comments and criticism that people have posted online turn the story into an Internet event suitable for the web story page. Coverage thus goes beyond the conventional to include diverse opinion and debate. On any given day, the editor usually chooses topics, debates or events that have generated the most comments or reposts on weibo. In selecting stories, "the evaluation system is in the hands of netizens," he said. This editor has come to see the Internet as the sole media channel enjoying some degree of freedom, where people can express, discuss, debate or simply complain with less restrictions. "Traditional media [in China] are castrated, missing a lot

of functions, which are supplemented by the Internet," he said, and the web story page is how his paper tries to recover some of its lost functions (October 26).

Such a page in a newspaper, of course, operates under more constraints than the raw material on which it draws. Similar pages were appearing in papers around the country around the same time as in Kunming, and the propaganda authorities took notice. According to the Kunming web story editor's supervisor, authorities tried to control the trend by requiring stories on such pages to be verified with offline, actual person sources before being published (September 18). This rule imposes additional work on reporters and editors of these pages, since they cannot simply relay and attribute Internet content.

One day, the editor of the Kunming web story page spotted a heated discussion on weibo, regarding rumors circulating online that a government cemetery for "revolutionary martyrs" had decided to relocate the tomb of a hero of China's Republican Revolution, which overthrew the Qing Dynasty, to make room for some Communist revolutionaries' tombs. On weibo, many people expressed disgust at what they interpreted as officials disrespecting history and instead trying to curry favor with higher authorities.

The editor instructed the reporter designated to work on the web story page to phone the local interior affairs bureau, which ran the cemetery, and verify the incident. The reporter replied: "Government agency telephones are such a headache. Nobody answers." He tried anyway, calling all the numbers he could find, and indeed, nobody answered any of them. The editor was insistent on getting comments from officials, saying that in addition to the information from the web, it would be "safer." When the reporter still could not reach the officials that entire afternoon, the editor said, "Then let's wait till tomorrow."

"Tomorrow other local papers would already run the story, like the previous times," said the reporter. The editor hesitated for a few seconds, but then stuck to his decision. He knew the issue was fraught with political sensitivity—essentially it

amounted to a Communist Party rivalry with its old enemy, the Kuomintang or Nationalist Party. But he did not want to succumb to what he saw as unnecessary taboos. “There are too many sensitive terms now,” he said, and brought up the case of a prominent Beijing critic of the Chinese government whose name media organizations periodically are told not to use: “Why is Ai Weiwei a sensitive term? He is just an artist.” In fact, the editor said, the paper sometimes had used sensitive terms in stories and faced none of the dire consequences some imagined. “Nobody came to say that I should get fired,” he said. “Why something is sensitive? At least tell me the reason. If no reason could be provided, why not go one step forward?” (September 28).

The editor said he adhered to the “red line” when it was clear. “If news administrators say something better not be covered, then we’d better not.” But he will pursue situations allowing for leeway. “If it looks like propaganda authorities haven’t said anything, then we can do it.” He also tries to stay away from local issues to avoid offending local authorities since they tend to be much more attentive to local controversies (October 26).

While print editors are cautious about pressing limits, the website editor at the same paper is more audacious. He once invited an unconventional candidate for representative to the local People’s Congress—an outspoken woman who had nominated herself—for a conversation, which was streamed live on weibo and allowed real time participation from the public, despite the fact that provincial propaganda authorities had explicitly banned media coverage of this topic. The conversation started at 2:30 p.m., and at 5 p.m. came a call from propaganda officials to the paper’s deputy chief editor, requesting the event’s termination. The web editor duly stopped the live chat. The deputy chief editor also said the related web story about the conversation that was at the top of the homepage needed to be demoted. The web editor did not listen to that part. He waited in his office until 6 p.m., when he figured the bureaucrats had left work, and then he went home, leaving the homepage as it was until the next morning. He did delete two

particularly sensitive comments from the web story but he kept the entire content on the website's weibo account, over which propaganda authorities had less control because, according to the editor, officials wishing to change material on weibo would need to contact sina.com, the commercial host (August 25).

When news media are prevented from covering or disseminating stories, weibo also represents an alternative way to get the message out. A Kunming TV journalist investigating evidence of misconduct by a powerful local real estate developer was ordered to keep his findings off the air, but he posted the gist of the story on weibo. It was reposted dozens of times before the reporter deleted it at the request of a supervisor. Although several days of work did not get broadcast, he told me he felt some comfort that the public was not kept completely in the dark (October 12, III).

Many journalists believe new communication technologies are compelling the government to become more transparent. For one thing, many government agencies and their media relations people have opened weibo accounts, which are keenly followed by many journalists and also open up communication channels that can produce better and quicker results than phoning. The website editor mentioned earlier, for example, often posts or reposts rumors or news tips on weibo and finds he sometimes can get a response from government PR people by directing his postings to relevant weibo account names, using the "@" symbol, so the message will be brought to their attention.

A supervisor who used to cover the police said the Internet has made authorities realize that few happenings can be covered up, and some have learned to share information in a timely manner (September 22, I). Others agree: "Before, government officials could simply say, I just won't talk to you. Now because of the Internet, there are more monitoring channels and the government has to talk," said a reporter (October 21, I). Another said authorities have learned to show more respect for public opinion than in the past and no longer call netizens "web mobs" as they commonly did a few years ago (September 22, I).

Overall, most agree, new media technologies and their uses are changing the media environment in fundamental ways. “The shackles will open, especially in the era of the Internet and self media,” said an executive. “The breakthrough for the media environment lies in the revolution in technology. The push from the bottom up could reach the goal of enabling the media to control their own coverage.” And in these new circumstances, efforts to rein in media can backfire. When local papers were banned from covering the new trend of citizens nominating themselves from the grass roots as candidates for political office, everyone could learn about it through weibo. “Not allowing coverage actually puts pressure on the government,” the executive said (October 12, I).

An executive from another paper said new media support the belief that “to watch is a power,” a phrase referring to public attention on weibo. Every time someone reposts or comments on a weibo post generates more material in the public arena, and the public attention alone puts pressure on the authorities. “You may just stand there and watch, not saying anything, but that is a demonstration of your sense of social responsibility,” he said. He added that he is concerned the government will seek to apply stricter control over weibo (September 18).

The capacious reach of the Internet makes some journalists’ work more influential than mere distribution of the print newspaper would suggest. News about chemical pollution in a city not far from Kunming was a case in point. Large amounts of industrial waste containing cadmium, which is toxic when absorbed in water and soil, had been dumped on the grounds of a village instead of being transported to a designated site for proper disposal. Some of the waste was said to have been dumped in a river upstream from the Pearl River, which runs through Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces. When readers put the news on weibo and suggested the toxins would flow all the way to Guangdong and Guangxi, which are more populous and economically advanced than Yunnan, the story got bigger and prompted the central government to send investigators.

"This matter becoming so big should be credited to the power of the Internet," the journalist on the story said. "All of a sudden there was a lot of attention." In fact, he added, many of the weibo posts circulated unconfirmed rumors, which he said he tried to correct with his own weibo postings. Nonetheless, thanks to the Internet, the impact of the story greatly exceeded his expectations (October 8, II).

The editorial directors of papers are increasingly aware of the usefulness of new media on commercial as well as journalistic grounds. At an editorial meeting, one Kunming chief editor with his eyes upon the benefits of new technologies emphasized the need to increase the paper's social impact through the communication power of websites, weibo and mobile apps, because only with bigger social influence could the paper charge more for advertising (August 17).

It needs to be noted that despite journalists' enthusiasm about the potential of new technology in pushing the boundaries, the actual outcome may well be disappointing, because the authorities are also becoming increasingly savvier in using the same technology to exert control. As already mentioned in the background chapter, the Central Propaganda Department and State Council Information Office actively seek restriction over political discourse on the Internet through various measures, including issuing regulations, adopting all kinds of blocking and filtering technologies, as well as use of cyber cops and even law enforcement (Endeshaw, 2004; Lacharite, 2002; Shie, 2004; Tai, 2006; Zheng, 2007).

New Challenges, New Ventures

The public nature of the Internet that journalists applaud also poses new challenges, problems and uncertainties for news producers and their organizations. Since news tips on the Internet are there for everyone to see, some journalists say it is getting harder to obtain exclusive stories (October 21, I; September 22, I). Reporters who do get what they think are exclusives are careful not to post the details on weibo too soon, in an

attempt to delay coverage by competitors. They may delay posting photos from breaking news scenes to prevent other media from getting there soon enough to file stories on the same day. Television reporters usually wait to post such images until right before the evening newscast, often long after the breaking news event is over. “If everyone [from local media] is there, we’ll post on weibo. If we were the only paper on the scene, we won’t post,” said a reporter (September 21).

Another reason reporters may withhold weibo information previewing forthcoming stories is to avert unwanted pre-publication attention from the authorities. One evening when a reporter had just filed a story about a recent court case, his supervisor yelled from another side of the newsroom that the Provincial Supreme Court had sent a message to kill the story because it had something to do with the controversial Li Changkui case. “Coverage of anything related to Li Changkui is not allowed,” said the supervisor. “What kind of reason is this?” the reporter objected and insisted the case in his story had nothing to do with Li Changkui.

Moments later, a supervisor of a higher rank walked in the newsroom, and the reporter turned to him to complain. The supervisor took a look at the story and said, “How is this related to Li Changkui?” The reporter said it was not. Then the supervisor noted that the reporter already had posted news about the case on weibo in which he compared it with the Li Changkui case. “The weibo post was just for fun,” the reporter said. Evidently, however, authorities were going on the association with the sensitive case made by the reporter himself. After further discussion, editors decided that if the reporter could get people at the Provincial Supreme Court to agree to publication, it could go ahead. The reporter was confident court officials would sign off and planned to seek clearance the next day.

Despite this unexpected twist, the reporter believed having weibo was much better than not having it. Authorities “can block this opening, but not that opening,” he declared. “It is now the era of weibo, of citizen journalists.” Indeed, he seemed somewhat

elated that his trouble-making weibo post about the case already had generated some buzz (October 12, II).

The Internet is also good for journalism in another way, in this reporter's view, because it provides a tool for the public to monitor behaviors of journalists. "The Internet puts more demand on journalists' ethics," he said. A veteran journalist from another paper shared this view. With news stories posted online, they and their producers come under a lot more public scrutiny, he said. "We must demand of ourselves to do better" (October 11, I; October 12, II).

At the same time, new media technologies have introduced new uncertainties and in some ways contributed to journalists' insecurities. They feel print media cannot keep up with the speed of information flow and a transformation is inevitable, but when and how solutions will emerge and what the changes will bring about are unknown. Most journalists in my study, however, seemed inclined to embrace rather than resist change, and to experiment with possibilities rather than forgo opportunities.

Most acknowledge that newspapers are the past and digital and mobile media the future. "Print media can only submit to and seek cooperation with the Internet and new media," said one veteran. "Everybody has seen the news on the web, so who will buy newspapers? Newspapers can only do in-depth news and repackaging" (October 21, II). A web editor said she and her colleagues from the post-1980s generation do not really read newspapers, explaining that they feel, "the Internet is closer to life and easier to accept," while newspapers are "too serious" (October 19, II). Another web editor who previously worked in print said he now sees newspapers as "backwards," mostly because the Internet can release, share and comment on the newest information on the same day while allowing for popular participation (September 16).

One executive sees the transformation from old to new media as a life-or-death issue for his news organization. "I used to assume that print journalists have more advantages than citizen journalists or self media, but now I don't think that is necessarily

the case," he said. The big stories no longer result from six months of dogged investigation, he said. Rather, they first circulate online, with public attention typically lasting 7 to 10 days, after which interest declines and people are no longer interested. In his view, there's often no point to digging deeper. He recognizes problems of highly charged opinion and inaccurate information online, but believes netizens themselves will dispel rumors and correct each other to arrive at something closer to truth. "It is not one person who is doing this, but a group of people," he said. "The power of netizens is really huge."

For now, traditional media still seem to enjoy higher credibility than online media, but those concerned with the ultimate fate of their organizations think credibility alone does not guarantee the future of newspapers. The same executive is openly pessimistic that newspapers will even survive. "I think the industry is bound to decline," he said. "It has low production efficiency, high costs, imprecise management, and poor profitability. Its communication effects are getting weaker, too. All this dictates further and further decline" (September 18).

His newsroom is working diligently at concerted reinvention. He summoned a group of reporters and editors to a meeting to discuss planning for the new media era and said the transformation "is already imminent" and was a matter of existence. "If we don't change, two years from now many people will lose their jobs," he said. The future direction of news coverage must be multiplatform, he said, incorporating the print version, the website, weibo and mobile devices. He stressed real time updating of news on weibo, with multimedia production combining text, audio and video. He said journalists must "use new media weapons to combat ugly social phenomena" and "use technology to push for [media] revolution."

At the same time, he expressed concern about lack of successful examples of transformation in the local media market, especially in terms of making profit. Perhaps due to such uncertainty, he stressed that they would not give up the print version. "The

newspaper is still the foundation," he said. "The paper cannot die. The company needs it to make money." After his remarks, reporters and editors had a discussion about the relationship between the paper and its website. Some said they were simply different platforms and neither should be subordinate to the other; some said the paper would be no match to the website and would become a niche product, or die (August 23).

The urgency of adapting to change came up frequently in Kunming newsrooms. At an earlier meeting at the same paper, the supervisor of "societal news," roughly akin to breaking news reporting, called on his reporters to think more about collaboration with the paper's website, and announced that contributions to both print and web versions would be considered in pay evaluations. He scolded some reporters for not updating their microblogs for months, and praised one reporter for being web savvy and updating on weibo frequently. A reporter was singled out as a good example of the paper's "first generation of multimedia journalists" for snapping a photo with her iPhone at the scene where the director of a local hospital was dissuading a man from jumping off the hospital building. The reporter, watching from the ground, had immediately posted the photo on weibo (July 22).

Some Kunming papers have begun to invest significantly in tools for the new media landscape. Before I arrived in 2011, one paper had purchased an iPhone4 for each of its 80 reporters and editors, who were told to "play with it" and obtain some experience. The same paper worked out a cooperative agreement with a mobile portal site, so that users in Yunnan who enter that portal on their mobile devices would be automatically directed to the mobile homepage of the paper. The paper also hoped to develop mobile applications for information services (August 23).

The paper also was promoting interaction between print and web in novel ways. For example, after the paper published a story on a fake Apple product store in Kunming, the website interviewed the reporter who had covered the story and featured his experiences and opinions in a web exclusive piece (July 22).

Social media have become a staging ground for the paper's new media exploration. Coverage of a group of Shanghai college students volunteering to teach at remote village schools in Yunnan provides an example. The newspaper website invited three student representatives to participate in a live microblog chat on a service trying to compete with the Sina weibo system, Tengxun weibo. The company had set up a separate site just for the purpose of this interactive chat, enabling everyone on the site to see the conversation unfold. Some days before, the newspaper website had announced the forthcoming event and posted a link to the special site with an invitation to readers to chime in with questions. Just to make sure there would be enough, web editors posted some questions the day before.

When the students arrived, they logged on using a group account and spent an hour answering questions already posted and any others that might arise during the period. Their answers could not exceed 140 characters, as weibo prescribes. All questioners needed to have a Tengxun weibo account in order to post. A host from the newspaper website moderated the exchange. The hour passed quickly, and then the three students sat down with news staff for another round of interviewing. The main points of the conversation went up on the Sina weibo page of the newspaper website, stories went up on the paper's own website, and a story about the students' visit to the newsroom and the live chat would be published in the print edition the next day.

This experiment in multiplatform news coverage would not have been possible, of course, if not for the Internet and social media. In fact, it was social media that brought the students and their project to the newsroom's attention. A website editor had come upon their activities through their postings on Sina weibo, followed the group, and when they were about to leave Yunnan and return to Shanghai, contacted them through the Sina weibo private message function and invited them to visit the newsroom (August 18).

Another Kunming paper, interested in the novel business possibilities of new media, established a new media subsidiary whose main task was to develop consumer

mobile applications providing information on shopping, dining and entertainment, with not much attention to news. The subsidiary company is housed in a newer, sleeker high-rise office building two bus stops away from the newsroom. There, young web engineers and web editors are charged with the task of creating Kunming's first newspaper mobile apps, for both iPhone and Android phones (August 17; September 5; September 20).

The paper's chief editor is also the boss of the new media company, and enthusiastic about exploring new business territories. "Newspapers are media with idealism," he said. "We do lots of stories, but aren't sure about the effects. New media can do more to satisfy commercial needs while facilitating information to serve the public better." To him, developing apps that allow people to find the best steak house in town is a more tangible effect than revealing official wrongdoing with no results. Still, he insists that his new media enterprise serves the broadest social strata, not the privileged. "We try to diminish, not increase, class differences through providing information services. This is also a kind of journalism ideal." He sees providing useful, everyday knowledge and making it available to everybody as advancing a kind of information fairness. His company also plans to enter the stock market. "I still have ideals and ambition," he said. "Because of new technologies, there are many possibilities" (October 18, II).

On both news and business trajectories, new media ventures also come up against obstacles and limitations. One major hurdle is simply being certified to operate news websites. Some journalists told me at least two of the Kunming local papers are not on the State Council media office list of websites authorized to repost news from other sources, which limits their content and puts them at a disadvantage (July 20; September 27, I).

Lack of copyright protection or enforcement, meanwhile, gives authorized websites an additional commercial edge. Websites approved to post stories from other news organizations often do so without crediting the source media, although usually reporters' bylines do appear. Websites taking stories certainly do not pay originating

organizations for rights. To make things worse, according to an executive at a Kunming paper, sites expropriating stories often re-edit them and introduce errors, which makes him mad enough to use the F word (July 20).

Over the past couple of years, as multimedia content has grown, propaganda officials have also imposed regulations that restrict the posting of original videos to some websites. The Kunming paper devoting great efforts to multimedia coverage, for instance, is not allowed to post original videos directly, although it can upload video to one of the legitimate video hosting sites and then embed the video on its own website (July 20). This complication is a source of frustration, with reporters trying to produce videos and get them posted and embedded encountering equipment problems, technical glitches and time delays. A photographer tussling with a three-minute piece for an entire afternoon told me that he had to work with pirated video editing software that sometimes acted up, and his supervisor said the paper was not willing to pay the price for the legitimate version. Once the photographer was done, he sent his piece to someone outside the paper who handled postings to a video host site (similar to YouTube), with no guarantee that the video would appear online in a timely manner. On this occasion, the piece was posted and then embedded on the paper's website within a few hours. People were frustrated but glad the wait did not carry over into the next day (July 26).

CHAPTER 11 JOURNALISM CULTURE WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

Thus far, this dissertation has presented an overview of journalism culture in Kunming, with attention to meanings journalists draw from and instill in their work and aspects of the organizational, political and social environment within which substance and forms of journalism culture emerge. This chapter concludes the study by analyzing Kunming's occupational culture in light of its specific position in time and place: contemporary China, a society undergoing profound social transition in an increasingly globalized world. Journalism culture in Kunming reflects and embodies the traits of its time and place. It is journalism culture "with Chinese characteristics," to use a common Chinese political phrase.

This project aims at synthesis and analysis that might produce better understandings of occupational cultures at Chinese news media as well as additional basis for comparative work. Before drawing conclusions about Kunming's journalism culture, some qualifications are in order. Although this is a study mostly focusing on the occupational level of journalism, it is necessary to look below as well as beyond this level to obtain a better understanding.

Neither global nor Chinese nor Kunming journalism culture is monolithic. The previous chapters drew on findings from four metro papers I studied in Kunming, discussing phenomenon shared among journalists at all four. A closer look would yield some subtle and nuanced differences among the different news organizations. In particular, although all face constraints, their status and organizational characteristics give rise to some different perceptions of and reactions to these constraints.

Diversity in Organizational Character

Paper A is funded and operated by a privately-owned media company and the semi-official societal organization with which it is affiliated for regulatory purposes

serves only as nominal sponsor and supervisor, involved neither in the daily business of the paper nor in supporting the paper financially. As such, this paper has the weakest political backing among the four metro papers, which in turn sometimes affects news choices. For instance, editors decided not to run a follow-up on a chemical pollution story broken by a competing paper, despite obvious interest in the matter, because they felt they lacked clout to defy a provincial propaganda ban on local media's further coverage of the topic. Unlike other papers affiliated with the municipal and provincial Party committees, the paper had no powerful political patrons to help fend off trouble if it stepped over the line. One editor compared the likely prospects to soccer: Angering the authorities would draw a "yellow card" warning for the first time, and after two yellow cards, the paper would be shut down, throwing more than 1,000 people out of work, he said. For the same reason, other ideas also were out of the question, such as a story assessing the impact of Kunming's subway construction. "It is a municipal project and you want to criticize it? No!" the editor said (August 15).

On the other hand, simply being affiliated with party organs and having closer ties with political agents does not automatically lead to more daring news coverage. Sometimes the result is quite the opposite. Indeed, news producers at papers C and D, which have stronger ties with the authorities, generally emphasize playing it safe and actually adhere more strictly to boundaries. An executive at one of these papers said his priority is "news safety," making sure his paper will be alive and well. An executive at the other, originally created by and still affiliated with the province's top party organ, admits to having inherited some official habits and conventions. The legacy is "both treasure and burden," he said, and then cited a common Chinese description of the press: "We are dancing while wearing shackles." So although his paper enjoys more circulation and influence than other local papers, it would pay high price for making mistakes, the executive said. Other papers that run stories provincial authorities warn against might

face a scolding, he said, whereas if his paper defies a warning, “the punishment will be harsher and more concrete.”

Furthermore, as a publication under a large official news conglomerate, Paper C does not control its own human resources and finance, and is answerable to its parent paper, which can demand that certain stories run and other stories don’t. The executive calls his metro paper “moderate conservative,” saying it is relatively “obedient” and also loathe to damage “good relations” with government agencies and authorities formed over the years. All these elements make covering sensitive issues and monitoring the authorities harder, and when the paper extends itself, care must be taken: “No hyping, no exaggerating headlines, no front page coverage, no full page, no multiple photos,” the executive said. Trying to monitor public power is still essential, he said, but his staff must be moderate, and never too negative, and they intend to maintain this style (October 12, I).

In contrast, Paper B, whose editorial operations are controlled by a large media group in another province, is more aggressive in its news coverage and display. This paper employs loud headlines and showy photos and does not shy away from putting sensitive stories on the front page or using full- and even multiple-page coverage. The fact that the parent company owns several regional publications with national reputations for boldness gives this Kunming metro paper both exemplars and fortitude for departing from convention and taking risks. The bigger better-known papers also take an interest in the metro’s major stories, amplifying the influence of some coverage (October 21, II). “Party papers serve the leaders, we serve the readers,” said a supervisor from this metro, adding that his paper strives to demonstrate the same values of social justice and fairness upheld by its better-known cousins (September 21). Nonetheless, like everybody else, journalists at this paper still watch out for the red line that cannot be crossed.

As for Paper D, once bold and now less so, its experience shows that leadership can make a difference. Under a prior chief editor, this paper was known for being

audacious and going after crime and corruption with zest, often using undercover methods, and steadily gaining market share. When that editor retired, his successor adopted a more moderate approach, staying away from too much darkness and embracing lighter, brighter stories (October 16; October 19, I; October 21, II).

Occupational Culture in National and Global Perspective

Nevertheless, despite noteworthy differences at the organizational level, much can be said about shared journalism culture in Kunming, and more generally in China. Journalists' work brings them into interaction with people from all walks of life and a broad range of institutions in all sectors of society. However, journalists operate within a broader set of conditions largely beyond their control, including culture, technology, regulations and other environmental constraints (McManus, 1994). This larger environment governs much about social relations that are integral to their occupational culture, including the important triangular relationships discussed earlier—among journalists, the disadvantaged, and the authorities. We have seen how disadvantaged groups turn to journalists and media to help convey grievances and promote rights. Journalists in turn draw satisfaction from work they believe speaks and acts for the disadvantaged. And journalists have ambivalent relationships with local authorities, since they want to maintain access to essential official sources but also want to monitor the powerful and are restrained from going too far. Relations between the authorities and ordinary people, including the disadvantaged, also has direct influence on journalists' work since conflicts between those with power and those without compel journalists to make a choice. Journalists typically favor the dispossessed and the cause of social justice, even if they cannot always realize in form what they believe in substance.

That news coverage can provide people with help they otherwise might not receive is not unique to the media in China. But one aspect of this is distinctive—namely, my finding from Kunming that helping members of lower strata voice and surmount their

difficulties and claim their rights is the dominant measure of journalists' self-esteem. Kunming journalists continue to find ways in their professional lives to assist those in trouble, even when they cannot affect grander ideas such as monitoring public power and pushing for political change. With the larger ambitions foiled again and again, many journalists have learned to back away or even given up. Helping those in need in smaller ways, by contrast, has much lower risk and often produces positive, real results, while also contributing to audience appeal. In other words, for these journalists, being the *social worker* is much easier than being the watchdog or muckraker.

Even so, much of the public continues to regard news media as a court of last resort. This speaks volumes about China's political and legal shortcomings, as well as highlighting the seriousness of social conflict, and makes helping the poor and powerless especially salient to journalists. Journalists know well that news coverage attracting donations for a cause is far easier to accomplish than stories exposing systemic problems. Yet the desire to go beyond calling for charity, and sometimes the opportunity to actually mediate conflicts between the powerless and the authorities are crucial to the occupational culture under study here.

As discussed in a previous chapter, the prevalence of social conflict and mistrust in China today may be understood in part as products of the ongoing transition into a modern age. In this process of more than a century, old communities and traditions are shattered, while new types of personal relations and modern systems are yet to be firmly established (Giddens, 1990). In China, for instance, millions of rural residents have relocated to seek a living in cities due to decreasing farmland and increasing labor demands from industrialization and urbanization. In leaving behind hometowns, these migrants also leave networks of kinship and social relations built up over generations to find unfamiliar positions in strange cities, even as city residents are trying to figure out interactions with the newcomers. Conflicts arising from this process have played a role in shaping the development of journalism culture. So has the erosion of trust, as old modes

of interaction are replaced by new ones. The replacement of face-to-face contact with forms of communication that cross boundaries of time and space—phone, e-mails, texting, and so on—of course is a major part of this dislocation. And our sense of the world increasingly rests on knowledge and information delivered by expert systems—from cars to electronic banking, from the steam engine to the Internet—which people must trust for the society to function (Giddens, 1990).

China's new, modern context of trust is still under construction, with much attendant disarray—political reform lagging behind economic reform, endemic official and private corruption, shortage of expertise and reliable expert systems, poor law enforcement. The very creation of new bases for trust is generating mistrust. And as we have seen, journalists regularly encounter contradictions resulting from mistrust and themselves are party to mistrust, which becomes another key element of the occupational culture.

Another finding of this study is that journalists in Kunming use the West, especially the United States, as a framework for comparison, a prototype against which China is constantly evaluated: lack of media freedom, unaccountable government, insufficient protection of basic human rights, weak rule of law, restrained discourse on universal values, and so on. Journalists compare their own news media unfavorably to *The New York Times, Wall Street Journal* and *Huffington Post*, or at least their mental constructions of those U.S. outlets. And metro paper editors across China are said to be interested in U.S. democracy in the 20th century through the book *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932-1972*, by William Manchester.

The comparative propensity is one manifestation of the influence of globalization on Chinese journalism. Broadly speaking, globalization may be understood as the intensification of social relations in the world that renders the life of people in one location influenced by that of people in other parts of the world (Giddens, 1990). Among the major forces of globalization are transnational corporations, including media groups,

which diffuse goods, technologies, advertisements, movies, television, publications, and so on, around the globe (Herman & McChesney, 1998; Schiller, 1991). Transmitted symbolic forms contribute, according to some, to the formation of a transnational culture, whereby cultural values from elsewhere eventually influence the real lives of people around the world (Hannerz, 1990; Tomlinson, 1999). The sort of China-overseas comparison observed in this study has much to do with increased flow of information from overseas as China continues to actively integrate into the global community in many ways. A huge influx of foreign media content via movies, television shows, publications, and of course the Internet has exposed Chinese people to new information and ideas from other countries, which open their eyes as well as minds (Lull, 1991; McCormick & Liu, 2003).

However, influence from foreign cultures is neither absolute nor unilateral; rather, the impact of globalization on identity formation and generation of cultural meaning is diverse and multifaceted. Rather than colonial domination or imperialism, global influences instead are likely to operate more through appropriation and adaptation, whereby local people borrow, incorporate or assimilate new meanings and values for their own purposes (Hall, 1997a, 1997b; Kraidy, 2005; Kraidy & Murphy, 2008; Tomlinson, 1999).

Chinese journalists exposed to values, ideas and viewpoints from the West do not just copy and paste. Instead, they appropriate their knowledge and perceptions of the West to their own needs. They uphold objectivity as a standard for good journalism, but also see virtues in leaning toward the disadvantaged, as long as the facts are right. They adapt the concept of the Fourth Estate with a theoretical twist—whereas the Chinese Communist conception of monitoring positioned the press as an agent of Party rule and beholden to Party and government guidelines, the journalists' concept envisions news media functioning as a power independent of Party and government. In light of what they see as growing disparities and worsening conflicts between rich and poor, haves and

have-nots, powerful and powerless in China, journalists recast the notion of universal values as germane to bettering the lot of the disadvantaged.

Such readiness to fit Western concepts to Chinese reality seems superficial or naïve at times. The construct of the Fourth Estate, for example, belies the fact that media everywhere have always been subject to political and economic controls (Altschull, 1995). But whether or not Chinese journalists use these concepts rigorously is not the point. What matters is that these foreign concepts provide the journalists with alternative symbolic resources for expressing alternative values and ideals, in a manner that invests their work with meanings appropriate for these times of media transformation and social change.

Kunming and China

Prominent characteristics of journalism culture in Kunming, including concern for lower social strata and desire to monitor power, are not new among Chinese journalists (Burgh, 2003; Polumbaum, 1990, 2008). Chinese journalists interviewed within the past decade by Polumbaum (2008) expressed similar sentiments: one spent years covering the hardship of migrants displaced by the construction of the grand Three Gorges Dam; another exposed the Beijing municipal government's demolition of historic neighborhoods. Chinese journalists in part are heirs to the upright moral official of traditional China, who devoted power and prestige to improving people's livelihoods. And journalists with courage to defy the authorities today have the same sort of passion for political change that their reform-seeking predecessors of the 1980s expressed during the first decade of the post-Mao reforms, when many intellectuals believed China was ready for a different political system, with more democracy and freedom. They included editor Qin Benli and his colleagues, who pressed for more political freedom up until their Shanghai paper, the *World Economic Herald*, was shut down in the period leading up to the June 4, 1989 crackdown on protesters (Hsiao & Yang, 1990). Reporters and editors at

the Beijing-based *Science and Technology Daily* acted similarly and reported profusely on the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. At one point, hearing that the government might stop distribution to postal carriers, staff themselves carried stacks of papers to post offices around Beijing for delivery (Goldman, 1994).

Earlier studies of Chinese news work have focused on journalists working in prominent political and economic centers, chiefly Beijing and Shanghai, with some attention to the southern province of Guangdong. Thus, it is significant to learn that journalists in Kunming, capital city of a remote border province, share much of the ethos of their peers in better-studied places. Kunming journalists keenly follow stories about famous investigative journalists or outspoken media figures elsewhere in the country, as well as taking vocal interest in independent, watchdog journalism abroad. Evidently, Kunming is not as isolated as its geographic position and political and economic marginality might suggest.

Kunming journalists' analogy comparing their jobs to migrant labor is another feature with national significance. The notion that journalists are migrant workers of words resonates with a general decline in their occupational status over the past few decades. Journalists of the Mao era saw themselves as both servant and savant, as bearer of culture for the nation, with responsibility to educate the ignorant masses (Cheek, 1997). They were not unlike traditional Confucian scholar-bureaucrats, caring about the common folks but from a top-down, paternalistic perspective. As highly literate and educated, they were part of the intelligentsia, belonging to social elites (Polumbaum, 1990). Such elitism continued into the post-Mao period as Deng Xiaoping launched the reforms. Reformist journalists at that time, such as *People's Daily* chief editor Hu Jiwei (Polumbaum, 2002), sustained the tradition of the moral official trying to do good for the people. Journalists were still part of the Party propaganda apparatus. China would not fully embrace the market economy until the early 1990s, when most media outlets were still state-funded and media workers state employees.

Since embarking on the path of truly dramatic marketization and much more active integration into the global economic system, the rapid commercialization of media has steadily eroded journalists' elite social standing. The rise of metro papers in particular nurtured a cohort who saw themselves less as elite intellectuals and more like service providers trying to please consumers (Liu, 2000; Sun, 2002). The growth of consumer culture also attenuated the belief that common people need moral officials or caring intellectuals to speak for them. Nowadays they are consumers with consumer sovereignty (Donal & Keane, 2002), and media must care about what their audiences want in order to sell and make profits.

Journalists in Kunming gave no impression of subscribing to elitism. To the contrary, their migrant worker analogy—even if hyperbolic—puts them at the lowest tier of China's urban society. Although these journalists realize their work offers them a public platform and therefore carries some special powers and responsibilities, many of them speak of the job like any job, as a way to make a living. Certainly it is unthinkable in Kunming's metro papers to hear anybody self-identify as a government functionary (*xuanchuan ganbu* or "propaganda cadre"), or even as an intellectual. These journalists are seen, and see themselves, as belonging among the common people.

This does not necessarily extrapolate beyond metro papers. On a national scale, Chinese journalists today could be said to have a fragmented sense of collective identity. Those working for top party organs such as *People's Daily* still are defined as propaganda cadre and viewed as elite, and some working for publications targeting the well-educated or business elites pride themselves on being respectable professionals (Liu, 2000; Pan, 2003). But at the level of the metro papers, a new kind of differentiation is emerging.

In other ways, however, Kunming's journalism culture mirrors major trends in China's journalism landscape. Certainly the sort of bedevilment by constraints, frustration, disappointment and discontent that I found among journalists in Kunming is

common to much of the scholarly literature on Chinese journalism in the reform era (Donald & Keane, 2002; He, 2000; Pan, 2000; Pan & Lu, 2003; Polumbaum, 1990, 2008). In the immediate post-Cultural Revolution decade, up to the 1989 demonstrations, journalists in China wrestled with the challenges of "serving two masters," the Communist Party and the people, supposedly compatible missions that in reality could be at odds. Drawing on Schudson (), Polumbaum (1990) described this as a tension between the interests of "hegemonic communication," furthering the ruling Party's ideological and political control, and "petitionary communication," representing the common people. Chinese journalists were shifting toward the latter mode even as circumstances often restricted them to the former. Mounting discontent thus built up in the press corps, prompting calls for journalism reform that would entail more autonomy from political power and legal protections for press freedom.

With accelerated commercialization of media beginning in the 1990s, journalists increasingly found themselves now serving not two, but three masters: the Party, the people (in their role not merely as citizens but more and more as consumers), and advertisers (Donald & Keane, 2002). In addition to following the Party line, they now had to watch out for the bottom line as well (Zhao, 1998). At times, commercial interests and political demands pulled in opposite directions, and journalists found ever more creative methods to find a safe balance. Again, journalists found much cause for discontent with the circumstances of their work (He, 2000; Pan, 2000).

Yet another decade or so on, the situation of journalists in Kunming indicates a new stage of strategizing. While crime news, critical news and even human interest news were still sensitive areas of coverage in the 1980s (Polumbaum, 1990), they have become the mainstay of metro papers in Kunming. While many news organizations were experimenting with non-routine practices and improvisations that might satisfy both the Party and the market in the 1990s (Pan, 2000), Kunming's metro papers have applied many lessons learned from the past two decades of market competition and are savvy

both in business operations and in dealing with authorities. But journalists in this study are still discontented, frustrated and often disappointed, because now their expectations are even higher and aspirations bigger. The boundaries on news coverage have expanded substantially, and journalists want greater political change, more press freedom, better protection of basic human rights, and a fairer society. Meanwhile they see problems getting worse, from environmental pollution to social and economic disparities to official malfeasance and corruption (Buckley, 2012). Comparing my fieldwork findings to prior studies, I cannot help concluding that the agony of journalists in Kunming is even more severe than the tribulations of preceding generations of Chinese journalists.

My study lends support to Lynch's earlier findings (1999) that journalism in China continues to evolve along three trajectories: commercialization, globalization, and pluralization. The transformation of Chinese media from being Party mouthpiece to partly mouthpiece, partly political public relations agency, and partly business continues apace. The constraints of political control combined with business pressures, the ambiguities and contradictions of a developing market economy under an authoritarian political system, and the tensions between continuity and change (Lee, 1994; Zhao, 1998) have, if anything, intensified in this latest period.

At the same time, my findings suggest some noticeable new trends in Chinese journalism, propelled by use of new media technologies and corresponding growth of civic consciousness. Mobile devices, social media, the Internet, and so on, do make a difference to some degree, enabling journalists to broaden the range of coverage, push the boundaries even further, and generate bigger public reaction. These trends are contributing, bit by bit, to more freedom, autonomy and power of the press. Press control seems more and more about endeavoring to control the opinions of the intelligent, rather than trying the shape the beliefs of the ignorant.

New communication technologies are not a panacea, but they clearly can facilitate the growth of a civil society in a country like China (Tai, 2006; Yang, 2003; Zheng,

2007; Zhou, 2005). The news media and journalists are very much part of the process. As seen in previous chapters, the Internet and weibo provide journalists in Kunming with more sources of news and more interaction with the public. The Internet and social media are important tools in public interests projects, a new strategy that one of the metro papers I studied is actively pursuing. These new trends reflect progress in the development of a civil society, with the media an integral part, and they empower each other.

Last but not least, as a research project focusing on the perspective of journalists, the current study furthers a growing body of work debunking stereotypes of Chinese journalists (Burgh, 2003; Polumbaum, 2008). Far from being fearful and timid and content acting as official mouthpiece, Chinese journalists are thoughtful and reflective, and many are courageous and full of passion and ideals. They face the challenge of producing quality and meaningful journalism under state control and within propaganda framework and are constantly testing the parameters. As Polumbaum (2008) puts it, for the best of China's journalists, "the adventure of making sense of dynamic and bewildering times is a mission, privilege and honor, and its own reward" (p. 9). They might feel frustrated and conflicted, yet many continue to fight for what they believe and aspire to achieve.

Theoretical Implications

In addition to confirming and expanding on prior scholarship, my project encountered new issues and some surprises in the field, and the resulting lessons have important theoretical implications for the study of journalism culture. It seems clear that some aspects of the substance of the journalism culture can be expressed mainly as aspirations, and may not be fully materialized in practice. Many of my informants' aspirations fall short, such as monitoring power, furthering fundamental political change, and promoting social justice on a large scale. The fact that many of the journalists' values

and ideals cannot be materialized, or not fully so, in practice constitutes a unique characteristic of the journalism culture under study and speaks volumes about the larger societal context within which the occupational culture takes shape. All the same time, the endurance of journalistic ideals not realized under current conditions indicates discord between the occupational culture and the broader environment. In a transitional country like China, such dissonance could well signal further social change, as journalists continue to push, albeit inch by inch, for further advances toward their ideals.

A theoretical lesson to be learned from this field experience is that there is no one-on-one correspondence between materialization and values, something assumed by some scholars. Hanitzsch (2007), for example, maintains that journalism culture is articulated at three levels, cognitive, evaluative and performative, with the first two concerning work definitions, world views and occupational ideology and the last one tapping practices that materialize what has been shown at the first two levels. "Journalistic practices are shaped by cognitive and evaluative structures, and journalists—mostly unconsciously—perpetuate these deep structures through professional performance" (Hanitzsch, 2007, p.369).

My fieldwork, however, tells a different story, in that some values are expressed but not practiced and some practices do not necessarily match the expressed values. In the particular journalism culture explored here, there is clearly a gap between what the journalists aspire to do and what they actually can accomplish, between their definitions and conceptions of their work and actual practice. In other words, under specific social conditions, journalists' ideas and practices do not automatically and seamlessly correspond with each other. Journalists themselves, at the same time, are well aware of the gap between ideals and reality. This is primarily what produces their profound and prevalent sense of frustration, disappointment and discontent.

Therefore, to fully understand a journalism culture, it is not adequate to just sort out the substance and form, or the ideas and practices of a certain group of journalists.

Rather, it is crucial and frankly, more fruitful, to look beyond what journalists think and do as well as how these two aspects resonate with each other and pay attention to the gaps and discrepancies between the ideas and practices. These gaps and discrepancies, in turn, may tell more about both the journalism culture and the broader enveloping culture and lead to a more comprehensive, deeper and nuanced understanding of that particular journalism culture.

In addition, any journalism culture, including Kunming's, is likely to be fluid rather than stable, especially in a rapidly changing context such as contemporary China. Journalists' views and ideas will be in flux and may range along a spectrum. In Kunming, some journalists felt fairly satisfied that their stories might better or save one individual's life, while others experienced high levels of frustration because their news coverage failed to deliver the kind of sweeping change they hoped for. Some journalists are determined to pursue the ideals of monitoring power and pushing for social change while others are turning their efforts to producing fun, entertaining. While one news organization is busy remodeling its print version, another is investing in developing mobile apps.

Thus, an important lesson of my fieldwork is that in trying to understand a transitional society like today's China, one cannot expect a relatively well-formed, mature culture waiting to be analyzed. A researcher is not going to find clear cut answers, and needs to open one's mind to fluidity, uncertainty and contradictions, and indeed, embrace the noise and messiness as part of the culture. In Chinese society and culture at large, values, ideas and behaviors are emerging, mixing and disappearing all the time (Lynch, 1999; Zha, 1995). And in China as elsewhere, journalism culture is indeed shaped and constrained by the social, political, economic and cultural conditions in which it operates (Berkowitz, 2011; Gans, 1979; Schudson, 1997[1989]).

Together, these lessons indicate that journalism culture is no doubt an integral part of broader culture, deeply intertwined with political, economic, cultural, social and

technological conditions surrounding it. News work may be analyzed as an occupational culture, but cannot be fully accounted for at the occupational level alone. Meaningful interpretation must involve higher levels of analysis, from institutional to national and even global (Berkowitz, 2011; Reese, 2001; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Conclusion

Through fieldwork of more than three months, the current study aims at exploring the journalism culture in a southwestern China metropolis, Kunming, answering the question of what and how journalists there give meaning to their work.

Participant observation, interviews and analysis reveal the following characteristics of the substance and form of the journalism culture. In terms of substance (i.e. the meanings journalist give to their work), journalists have different definitions of their job, including just a job or means to survive, a public occupation that has the power to speak to and for the public, record taker of history, a tool that different people use for their own purposes, the monitor of public power and crusader for social advance. There is no single definition that these journalists all subscribe, and some even say "journalist is everything and nothing." But they do seem to agree that they are NOT "kings without crowns," an old notion of journalists as a powerful agent of justice and truth.

In term of collective identity, journalists in this study call themselves "migrant worker of words," indicating their contract based employment as opposed to long-term hires as with the Leninist press system decades ago, their rather low social status as opposed to elite propaganda cadres in the past, as well as their mere income that can barely let them survive or afford the middle-class life.

The journalists also share some values, ideals and beliefs. They believe the meaning of their work lies in their ability to make a difference through their news coverage, such as push for political change toward more political freedom and more accountable government, as well as make the society fairer and people's basic rights

better protected. It is also meaningful for them to be the watchdog for the public through monitoring the powerful, revealing wrong doings by government officials, authorities, powerful social institutions and businesses, and having those responsible punished. Another way to make their job meaningful is to help those in need, particularly the deprived, disadvantaged social strata in China, and most of the journalists in the study gain a sense of achievement through such helping. The journalists also uphold objectivity as the standard for quality journalism, although acknowledge their tendency of siding with the common folks as opposed to the authorities in many cases, which they do not think is necessarily wrong.

In terms of form (i.e. the practices that materialize the meanings), journalists in this study invest a lot of time and energy, even emotions, to help those in need, fulfilling their belief of helping the deprived and promoting social justice, while gaining job satisfaction in the process. They also try their best to monitor public power (i.e. authorities and officials) as much as they can, although they have to mind the degree, learn not to make definitions, and often find themselves "beating up the fly instead of the tiger," or "monitoring only a drop of water instead of the whole body of the water," while maintaining the delicate enemy-friend relationship with the authorities. In addition, to carry out their perceived mission of being the watchdog, they often have to go undercover in order to reveal wrong doings that harm public interests.

It is noticeable that some of meanings expressed by journalists are not fully or at all materialized through practices due to various constraints imposed to the press. For these journalists, political control from municipal, provincial and central authorities, interference from authorities and non-authorities alike to their reporting activities, frequent bans on various stories, the ultimate limit of the red line (issues concerning the one-party political system, conflicts between Han and ethnic minority groups, fundamental human rights, etc.), as well as pressure from advertisers are obstructing the realization of their values, ideals and beliefs. Caught in between their aspiration and the

dire reality, they express strong frustration and discontent, describing themselves as "conflicted." These emotions constitute a distinct aspect of the meaning they assign to their work.

It is also found that the journalists bond with each other as a community through other culture forms in their daily life in the newsroom. They get together for lunch and dinner, for weddings and New Year celebration. They show off their voice at karaoke clubs or get drunk in bars. They share their stories, feelings and opinions during these gatherings, as well as vices like chain smoking. They are colleagues at work and friends off work. They poke fun at each other, tease each other, but also support each other. They laugh together, curse together, and fight for their dreams together.

Although this is a study mostly focusing on the occupational level of journalism, a better understanding of the occupational requires examining it in relation to elements below as well as beyond this level. At the organizational level, different news organizations have different perception and reaction to the constraints they face, some more obedient, some more audacious. The study also demonstrates how journalists' work intertwines with its social environment. Three pairs of social relations, between journalists and authorities, powerful social institutions (authorities included) and the disadvantaged, as well as the disadvantaged and journalists, greatly influence the way journalists give meaning to their work. Frequent conflicts between the disadvantaged and social institutions such as government, company with government ties and state-run institutions like the hospital, usually subject the poor and powerless to violation of their rights by the powerful, arousing journalists' desire to promote social justice and causing journalists to side with the disadvantaged. Rampant mistrust across the three pairs of social relations becomes the reason for journalists' attempt to monitor the authorities and authority obstruction to reporting in some cases, and adds to the already staggering frustration and disappointment among journalists, when the very people they try to help

abused their sympathy and good will. Such conflicts and mistrust, in turn, could be regarded as social phenomena emerging in the process of China's modernization.

In addition, as a result of China's aggressive seeking integration into the global system in recent decades, more and more Western values and ideas are presented to Chinese people. As shown in this study, journalists in Kunming constantly use the West, especially the US, as a comparison framework, a prototype against which situation in China is evaluated, even though some of their ideas about the West are myths. Ideas and concepts from American journalism, such as objectivity, the Fourth Estate and watchdog journalism, are appropriated by the journalists as an alternative symbolic resource to construct and express alternative values and ideals, or meanings of their work.

Another important aspect of global influence is technology and new media. IPhones, mobile apps, multimedia news production, Twitter-inspired weibo, to name just a few, are changing the concept of news to be more instant and interactive with the audience through sharing on social media, allowing journalists to push the boundaries further through coverage online, and providing some news organizations with new business opportunities as well as new passion for some journalists.

It could be concluded that the journalism culture found in Kunming is one of testing limits and pushing boundaries, and of wide and deep frustration, given China's peculiar press system which in some respects is set free to explore the market while in other ways is pulled back by an authoritarian government. The frustration is not despair, but a strong impulse for change, in accord with the Chinese society at large. The journalism culture is one of active involvement of local life, especially helping the poor and powerless, driven by deepening disparities among social strata and rising social conflicts in recent years. The journalism culture is one of appropriating Western ideas and practices, including new technologies, to help envision a country and a profession deemed better. The journalism culture is also one of contradictions and uncertainties, still in the making and changing at a rapid pace, just like China as a whole. It is a journalism

culture of this particular transitional era and a place in the midst of transformation, with Chinese characteristics.

Although studies on Chinese journalism from journalists' perspective are not in short supply (e.g. Burgh, 2003; Cheek, 1997; He, 2000, 2003; Hsiao & Yang, 1990; Pan, 2000; Pan & Lu, 2003; Polumbaum, 1990, 2008) and findings from the current study concur many of the findings in previous studies, this study distinguishes itself in several ways. First, it applies the theoretical framework of occupational culture and examines systematically the substance and form of the journalism culture to answer the question of what and how journalists give meaning to their work. Previous works also touched upon journalists' perception of the meaning of their work, but rarely invoked the concept of occupational culture or analyzed the meaning in terms of substance and form as well as the correlation or discrepancy between the two aspects. The current study, therefore, contributes to the scholarship of Chinese journalism a rather new analytical framework.

Second, the current study addresses some newest trends in the ever-changing world of journalism in China, including use of new technologies, influence of social media and development of a civil society. Although there are already quite some studies addressing these recent changes, examining them from the perspective of the meaning of journalists' work is a rather novel approach. Third, the current study is conducted in a place that has rarely been noticed by US-based scholars on Chinese journalism. A study of journalism culture in Kunming expands the range of the literature through exploring a different locale than the often-studied places like Beijing or Shanghai and a different group of journalists: those work for local tabloids, and therefore contributes some new knowledge on Chinese journalism.

The current study also contributes to the scholarship of journalism culture in general through some lessons learned in the process of fieldwork and analysis. It suggests that to fully understand a journalism culture, it is not adequate to just sort out the substance and form, or the ideas and practices of a certain group of journalists. Rather, it

is more fruitful to look beyond what journalists think and do as well as how these two aspects resonate with each other and pay attention to the gaps and discrepancies between the ideas and practices, which may well tell more about the journalism culture and the broader culture surrounding it. Also, while studying journalism culture, especially in a transitional society like today's China, the researcher cannot assume stability and clear-cut answers to many questions, because the subject could well be full of fluidity, contradictions and still in the process of changing. Therefore, the researcher needs to be open to uncertainties and even messiness. Eventually, a meaningful interpretation of journalism culture has to involve analysis at levels beyond the occupation to reach broader social, cultural and even the global level, because journalists assign meanings to their work not just based on their experience within the occupation, but more based on their interactions with people and institutions in the world they live in. As such, this study illuminates larger questions such as interrelationships among politics, economics, technology and tradition, the intersection among local dynamics, national trends and global influences, and how digital media are entering the mix in the creation of mediated meaning.

Meanwhile, I acknowledge that people's view and perception about me as a researcher inevitably influenced their interaction with me and the information they provided. I did my best to reduce such influence throughout my fieldwork.

The current study essentially provides an overview of the journalism culture in Kunming, from its substance, form, social environment, national and global context, to some new trends. This study, however, addresses several aspects and characteristics of the journalism culture without delving too deep into each every one of them. In fact, some of the aspects and characteristics, if examined alone, could yield deeper insight and more interesting findings regarding contemporary journalism culture in China, such as journalists' habit of constantly comparing China with the West and their appropriation of Western journalism values in their own work, or social media, namely weibo's role in

pushing the boundaries of political coverage, or journalists' enthusiasm toward public interest projects and how this facilitates a stronger civil society in China. All these topics, and more, are worth separate and further inquiries in the future.

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