

# SILENCING CHINESE MEDIA

The Southern Weekly Protests and the  
Fate of Civil Society in Xi Jinping's China



GUAN JUN

Introduction by David Bandurski and Fang Kecheng

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# Introduction

David Bandurski and Fang Kecheng

*The Rise and Fall of Southern Weekly and the Changing Landscape of Journalism in China: A Pivotal Event*

On January 7, 2013, as hundreds of protestors gathered outside the headquarters of a major newspaper group in China's southern city of Guangzhou, foreign journalists dispatched to the scene might be forgiven for reducing a complex story to its barest essentials. The heart of this story was, to all appearances, "a battle over media censorship"—as the *New York Times* reported in an article that bore the headline "Protest Grows over Censoring of China Paper."<sup>[1]</sup> Under the watchful eye of police and security who seemed powerless to act, demonstrators massing along Guangzhou Avenue hoisted posters bearing messages such as "Resisting censorship of the news; give me back my freedom of expression," and "Abolish controls on newspapers; give me back my press freedom." Television footage, broadcast on CNN and other global networks, showed Chinese stepping up to the gates of the newspaper headquarters and laying down white and yellow chrysanthemums, traditional flowers of mourning, as they might before the grave of a beloved family member.<sup>[2]</sup> Online too, Chinese rallied to the cause—for, again, that is exactly what it seemed. Posting to her millions of fans on the popular Weibo social media platform, Chinese actress Yao Chen invoked the words of the Soviet-era dissident writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: "One word of truth outweighs the whole world," she wrote.<sup>[3]</sup>

The government responded by censoring key terms online—not only words of obvious sensitivity such as "press freedom" and "freedom of expression," but also simple words with indirect associations with the protests like "Guangzhou Avenue," the address of the newspaper group, and even general references to "the south."<sup>[4]</sup>

For those watching from the outside, what came to be called the "*Southern Weekly* incident" seemed at the time to be an inflection point. Open protests calling for freedom of the press had not happened in China, certainly not on this scale, in nearly a quarter century—not since the crushing of pro-democracy demonstrations in 1989. Here, they were happening right outside the gates of the Nanfang Media Group, publisher of both the *Nanfang Daily*, the official "mouthpiece" of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in China's prosperous southern province of Guangdong, and of the newspaper inspiring the protests, the more freewheeling *Southern Weekly*.

Since its launch in the 1980s, *Southern Weekly* had become symbolic for many of the pro-reform spirit in China, and the ethos of openness and truthfulness so crucial, in the eyes of many, to sustaining reform. The protests were unfolding, moreover, just a few months after the Party had sworn in a new general secretary, Xi Jinping, at the Eighteenth National Congress of the CCP in November 2012. What kind of top leader was Xi Jinping? Was he a reformer who might seize on the opportunity afforded by the public outcry over press censorship, affirming the crucial role played by *Southern Weekly* as a reform-minded newspaper? Or was he a hardliner, sure to regard the hue and cry in Guangzhou as a brazen affront to his power and position and that of the Party?

On January 7, Victoria Nuland, a spokesperson for the US Department of State, weighed in on the event during her daily press briefing: "Well, as you know, we have long defended and supported the right of media freedom, both for Chinese journalists and for international journalists operating in China," she said. "It is, of course, interesting that we now have Chinese who are strongly taking up their right for free speech, and we hope the government's taking notice."<sup>[5]</sup> Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Minxin Pei, a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College, characterized the incident as a major test for China's new leadership, and a sign of an opening society that was now more resistant to curbs on freedom: "The incident shows the promise of glasnost from below as China's society becomes more defiant and willing to challenge the Party's authority. But this means if the newly installed leaders want to maintain any credibility, they will soon be forced to take a stand on the most divisive and dangerous issue in China—political reform."<sup>[6]</sup>

The stakes, clearly, were high. But amid the observation and speculation, some of the most critical voices were absent. Most importantly, no one had yet heard from the *Southern Weekly* reporters and editors directly in the path of the storm. Days earlier, a group of prominent former journalists from the newspaper, including Qian Gang, the founder and codirector of the China Media Project, had spoken out in an open letter supporting *Southern Weekly* staff and sharply criticizing the actions of Guangdong's propaganda chief, Tuo Zhen, who was accused not just of intruding in an unprecedented manner on independent editorial decisions at the paper, but of directly introducing a number of foolish and embarrassing factual blunders—what the letter deemed "numerous errors and accidents"—into the highly celebrated New Year's edition, long seen as having an important role in setting the professional tone for the year. "We are media professionals who formerly

worked at *Southern Weekly*, and we must voice our shared position on the recent ‘2013 New Year’s greeting’ incident at the newspaper,” the former staffers wrote. “We feel that what has unfolded over the past two days is a matter of extreme seriousness.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Still, these former editors and reporters, while in close contact with *Southern Weekly* staffers, were not directly involved in events as they unfolded, and they too were unclear about many of the details of exactly what had happened to prompt the strike action. The chief reason for this lack of clarity was the chaotic and constantly shifting nature of the strategic game unfolding inside the offices of the Nanfang Daily Group. Watching events from the outside, international media correctly observed the important role social media played in rallying support for the embattled newspaper. But they had no idea just how fractious the internal discussions had already become within the private chat groups *Southern Weekly* staffers used to suggest courses of action, communicate strategy, and unburden their emotions. The incident was not, as international reporting sometimes made it seem, an act of simple heroics, a principled stand on the hallowed ground of press freedom in the face of a Goliath system of press censorship. To say so, however, does not at all diminish its importance as a stand for a whole range of ideas celebrated and put into practice by the journalists involved—ideas about journalistic professionalism, public interest, the need for fact-based reporting, and so on—that many of us outside China would recognize as being akin to our own notions about the role of the media and the need for press freedom.

The story that follows provides a rare glimpse into the sometimes-baffling substance of actions and discussions within *Southern Weekly* as the protests continued outside the gates and online. Written by Guan Jun, a former journalist at *Southern Weekly* who at the time was no longer working at the paper but maintained a close connection with staff there, it is based on interviews with those involved, as well as access to firsthand materials (such as chat records) and other sources. Readers may think of it as an in-depth work of journalism in which a seasoned Chinese reporter turns the skills of his profession on an important story about that profession in the larger context of Chinese society and politics. In this sense, this book is in some ways an extension of the professional spirit long embodied, for many, in *Southern Weekly*.

What do those professional values mean? Our hope is that such questions might be answered, in whole or in part, by the story itself as one form of documentation of what happened in Guangzhou in January 2013. But we hope to offer the reader in the remainder of this brief introduction some sense of what *Southern Weekly* has meant for China since its launch in the 1980s, and why so many, not least Chinese journalists, felt that the stakes were so high.

### “BORN IN 1984”

*Southern Weekly* (*Nanfang Zhoumo*) has long been regarded as one of the most influential and symbolic news media in contemporary China, and it was once considered “a publication with the highest credibility among the general public” and “the only paper with a soul.”<sup>[8]</sup> It has produced numerous pieces of quality investigative journalism and published articles that express diverse opinions in a restricted political environment. It is perhaps the best case through which we can examine the changing landscape of journalism in China, and more generally, it also reflects the achievements and limitations of China’s reform since the late 1970s.

*Southern Weekly* was launched on February 11, 1984, and over the next decade progressively transformed itself from a newspaper focused on entertainment, culture, and economics to a more serious publication by the middle of the 1990s, with a special section dedicated to more investigative stories. To mark the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2009, it published an editorial called “Born in 1984.” Although the piece made no explicit reference to George Orwell’s novel on totalitarianism, acute readers could not escape the message coded into the headline. Sure, the newspaper had gained a reputation for pushing the envelope, fighting for whatever space it could—and in nine months’ time it would be chosen by the Obama administration for an exclusive interview with the president during his visit to China.<sup>[9]</sup> But *Southern Weekly* was nevertheless a newspaper born and raised in a country in which the ruling Communist Party allowed only very limited press freedom.

China is not the Oceania of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Though decidedly a totalitarian state before the death in 1976 of Mao Zedong, who had drawn from the Leninist propaganda model to construct a media system that served as the mouthpiece of the Party, and of himself personally, China in the reform period was a country in transformation. The economic reform policies pursued in the late 1970s, along with the recognition that Mao’s total domination of the media had contributed to a “falsehood, exaggeration and emptiness” that exacerbated tragic missteps,<sup>[10]</sup> brought the reform and commercialization of the media sector from the early 1980s onward. *Southern Weekly* was one among thousands of media outlets launched in China in the 1980s, a process that accelerated in the 1990s.

Though never liberated from the yoke of Party control, these media enjoyed a certain degree of latitude, in part because they responded to the growing demand for information from a rapidly changing and developing society. Based in Guangdong province, where China’s economic reforms first got under way, *Southern Weekly* is a subsidiary publication of



the party newspaper *Nanfang Daily (Southern Daily)*. It has the same ownership structure as *Nanfang Daily*—100 percent owned by the state—but its business model is completely different. While party newspapers are funded by the state and mainly distributed in the offices of the government and state-owned enterprises, commercialized newspapers (or “market-oriented newspapers”) like *Southern Weekly* must rely on advertising revenue and retail revenue from newsstands. They are given more autonomy and freedom in terms of content—and they must produce non-propaganda content in order to attract readers and advertisers.

This structural change laid the foundation for the emergence of better-quality journalism in China as journalists and editors increasingly professionalized and sought to distinguish their work, for commercial reasons as much as idealistic ones. Journalists at *Southern Weekly* began experimenting with different types of content, beginning first with entertainment and celebrity news, and later investing in more in-depth and current affairs content that could both appeal to readers and fulfill their professional aspirations. They found a formula for success in two types of content in particular. The first was investigative journalism, exposing cases of corruption, social injustice, and other scandals. The second was the opinion piece, which could introduce more diverse perspectives on key issues, often taking a critical stance against Party and government power.

Make no mistake—the censorship system was never removed, and never particularly relaxed. Because *Southern Weekly* and other commercialized media outlets were still embedded within the party-press system, as subsidiaries of official flagship publications they had to follow marching orders and be cautious about what they published. But there were also formal factors that allowed a never-specified degree of liberty. There was the official notion, for example, that “media supervision,” or *yulun jiandu*, as it is called in the official discourse, was necessary for the leadership to remain sufficiently informed. There was also the fact that controls on the media were largely exercised through post-facto discipline rather than prior censorship—meaning that editors could make calculated decisions about risk and run potentially sensitive stories. Communication researcher Maria Repnikova has referred to this dynamic as “guarded improvisation,” in which “officials cautiously endorse media supervision as a feedback mechanism, as journalists carve out space for critical reporting by positioning themselves as aiding the agenda of the central state.”<sup>[11]</sup>

For *Southern Weekly*, this “guarded improvisation” worked reasonably well, especially in the 1990s, when the local political climate in Guangdong was relatively open and tolerant. According to former editor in chief Zuo Fang, senior leaders in Guangdong in the 1980s and 1990s, including Xie Fei and Lin Ruo, offered their support and protection for the newspaper. “Our hearts accord with those of Guangdong officials in charge of reform and opening up,” Zuo Fang once said. He emphasized that this relatively harmonious relationship was based on four fundamental principles for the newspaper: (1) upholding the Communist Party’s rule; (2) upholding current policies; (3) upholding the current political system; and (4) upholding social stability.

Therefore, *Southern Weekly*’s success, journalistically speaking, was never oppositional or necessarily antagonistic in nature. It resulted from bounded innovations that consciously carefully avoided opposition to the Communist Party. For a time, it seemed there was ample room to maneuver within the confines of media control. *Southern Weekly* and other commercialized outlets could expose corruption at the local level. They could question social injustices, insofar as they did not explicitly link them to questions about the legitimacy of the political system. They could encourage more active discussion on economic and cultural issues—though political issues always remained formally off-limits. And they could also provide valuable history and context, often from prominent academics, that served to elucidate current affairs.

One fact often overlooked in the lionizing of journalists at outlets like *Southern Weekly* as conscientious agitators for free speech, which we alluded to at the outset, is that their work requires interaction with the propaganda and control apparatus on a constant basis in order to negotiate the boundaries of critical reporting and commentary.

The breakthroughs of *Southern Weekly* in terms of content came with huge commercial success. Like print publications and online media elsewhere in the world, market-oriented outlets in China have relied on two major sources of revenue: subscription and advertising. Because *Southern Weekly* was among the first—and many would say, among the best—in providing attractive and relevant content, the newspaper attracted millions of readers across the country. Many of these readers were highly educated professionals in other emerging sectors of China’s changing society, which meant a sizable and high-quality readership base that was attractive to advertisers. The most frequently seen advertisements appearing in *Southern Weekly* during its heyday in the 1990s and 2000s were from automobile companies. By the year 2000, at a time when China was still a largely undeveloped economy, *Southern Weekly*’s annual advertising revenue had already surpassed 100 million renminbi (RMB). The paper’s most experienced journalists could earn salaries of around 10,000 RMB per month, at a time when the average annual salaries of urban residents in China were roughly the same amount.<sup>[12]</sup>

Competitive pay and a professional working environment meant that talent from across the country was drawn to *Southern Weekly*, in turn strengthening the position and reputation of the newspaper. The spirit of professionalism and

social justice that *Southern Weekly* came to epitomize had complicated origins, but these included, as other scholars have noted, a long-standing liberal press tradition going back to at least the Republican Era and the late Qing dynasty, hand in hand with a deeper Confucian tradition that emphasizes the social and moral responsibility of the intellectual; and also Western theories of the role of the press, which have been used by Chinese journalists to resist the Maoist propaganda style.

## WHAT HAPPENED IN 2012?

The real turning point for *Southern Weekly*, and for Chinese journalism more broadly, came in 2012. It was that year that two major incidents took place. First, because of the popularization of digital media and new social media platforms, the viable commercial model pursued by media in China for more than two decades, focused on circulation and advertising revenue, started to stagnate and decline. We'll deal further with this issue in the next section. Second, the Chinese Communist Party held its Eighteenth National Congress in November 2012, during which Xi Jinping became general secretary. While more freewheeling commercial media had by this point been a frequent thorn in the side of the leadership, epitomized by such cases as the Wenchuan Earthquake in May 2008 and the high-speed rail collision in Wenzhou in July 2011, Xi Jinping would soon make it clear that he intended to move far more aggressively than his predecessors to bring the media to heel, part of a much broader process of concentration and consolidation of power.

In the months leading up to the Eighteenth National Congress, *Southern Weekly* bore the brunt of the pressure applied to more conscientious media under a generally more hostile official environment for journalism. This pressure would culminate in the events described in this book—a rare outbreak of opposition that would become a defining moment for Xi in the first months of his leadership.

But first we should rewind to May 14, 2012, and the appointment of Tuo Zhen, the former vice president of China's official Xinhua News Agency, as provincial propaganda chief of Guangdong. Tuo's management style toward the media was significantly harsher than that of his predecessors in Guangdong, breaking the tacit consent that had long existed between censors and journalists and disturbing the delicate balance in government-press relations. The change quickly became evident to journalists at *Southern Weekly* and other local publications. The space for "guarded improvisation" shrank to an extent unprecedented in the newspaper's history.

In November 2012, on the eve of the Party's National Congress, carefully devised plans by *Southern Weekly* editors for related coverage were scuttled repeatedly by Tuo Zhen's propaganda department. The result was the production on the opening day of the National Congress of what many staffers regarded as one of the most disgraceful editions in the newspaper's history, which included a series of ten short and hastily prepared articles running over the first eight pages that sang the praises of the outgoing Hu Jintao administration. More crucially, Tuo had introduced new policies and procedures for content censorship, including the pre-review by propaganda officials of all major story topics before journalists could begin their work. This broke with the long-held tradition of post-facto discipline and enforced self-censorship—which for many years had allowed journalists a degree of discretion.

Another factor was the promotion, in December 2012, of Hu Chunhua to Guangdong's top leadership post of Party secretary. Though not directly involved in management of the media, Hu Chunhua exacerbated the worsening situation by neglecting to support Guangdong media as many of his predecessors had since the 1990s. Throughout his tenure in Guangdong, Hu would prove conservative and low-key, his priority being to avoid all missteps that might jeopardize his promotion within the central leadership.

By the end of 2012, the conditions were ripe for the boiling over of tensions at *Southern Weekly*; nearly all the factors that had led to the newspaper's rise had been eroded by political changes that were not yet in full evidence. By this time, nearly everyone in the newsroom felt a deep and abiding anger and resentment over the progressive loss of professional space. The final straw came with the production of *Southern Weekly's* New Year's edition, due for release on January 1, 2013.

Among the fifty-two issues published each year by *Southern Weekly*, the year's first issue had long been the most valued and most anticipated, by both staff and readers. The New Year's commentaries, in particular, have been seen as standard-bearers of the paper's professional spirit and idealism, and many of these individual commentaries had left a deep impression even years later. The direct intrusion of Guangdong propaganda authorities into the editorial process of the New Year's edition of *Southern Weekly* in late December 2012 resulted not just in content that lacked the professional quality and gravity that was the paper's signature, but in content rife with rudimentary errors that many staffers found humiliating. The painful process of direct interference, and the loss of marginal autonomy it represented, were the catalysts that led most directly to the incident related in this book.

Guan Jun, the author of this story, formerly worked as a journalist at *Southern Weekly*. While he left the newspaper several years before the incident took place, he maintained close contact with the editors directly involved in the incident. He was, therefore, an outsider on the inside, and an insider on the outside—with a unique perspective on events. Guan is

also an experienced writer and journalist in his own right. All of these factors make him, in our view, someone uniquely positioned to tell this version of the events surrounding the *Southern Weekly* incident.

## WHERE IS CHINESE JOURNALISM NOW?

Ten years after the publication of the *Southern Weekly* editorial “Born in 1984,” it is scarcely possible to imagine a media outfit with similar reach and influence in China daring a headline so loaded with political meaning. The reasons for this are of course partly political, driven by General Secretary Xi Jinping’s uncompromising approach to media control and his broader consolidation of political power.

During a speech on February 19, 2016, following official visits to the Party’s flagship *People’s Daily* newspaper as well as China Central Television and Xinhua News Agency, Xi Jinping urged the imperative that media must be “surnamed Party,” and must “love the Party, protect the Party and serve the Party.” While Xi’s speech focused on core media operated by the Party, it had broader implications for the media—and we should recall that publications like *Southern Weekly* are subsidiaries of the Party press system, and as such are subject to the same discipline. Xi said, referring to “guidance of public opinion,” the notion that the Party must control the media in order to maintain social and political stability:

In the various aspects and stages of news and public opinion work, [we must] adhere to the correct guidance of public opinion. Party newspapers and journals at various levels, and television and radio stations all must abide by correct guidance, and all metropolitan newspapers and magazines and new media must also abide by correct guidance. News reports must abide by correct guidance, and supplements, special programs, advertising and publicity must also abide by correct guidance; current affairs news must abide by correct guidance, and entertainment and social forms of the news must also abide by correct guidance; domestic news reports must abide by correct guidance, and international news reports must also abide by correct guidance.<sup>[13]</sup>

Xi Jinping’s language makes an explicitly broad claim over all aspects of the media here, not just traditional print media, including metropolitan newspapers like *Southern Weekly*, and not just over breaking news, traditionally the priority focus of controls, but also over entertainment, advertising, and new media.

Xi Jinping’s more robust approach to media controls has had a noticeable chilling effect on the practice of journalism in China. Commercial publications such as *Southern Weekly* were once at the heart of an always troubled but in many ways thriving movement of investigative reporting. But that movement, as such, is now a thing of the past, and investigative journalists can no longer find the strategic space they once had.<sup>[14]</sup> Hard news and on-the-ground reporting are also areas quite broadly impacted by the tightening environment for journalists. Breaking news stories, like the July 2011 Wenzhou rail collision, were points of insistent pressure by the professional media up to 2012, and in many instances media would explicitly ignore propaganda directives in order to report stories. This happens less frequently now, and prominent cases early in the Xi Jinping era, such as the Yangtze River cruise ship tragedy in June 2015, showed that the authorities could now dominate news coverage in ways that previously had been difficult.<sup>[15]</sup>

But the dawn of the Xi Jinping era at the end of 2012 also came at an inflection point for the business and technology of the media in China. Since the *Southern Weekly* incident, within the space of less than a decade, new digital platforms such as WeChat have come to dominate the media space, decisively upsetting the previous business models that nurtured commercial publications and paid for talent and top journalism. These new media technologies, while offering apparent choice to consumers, have also been a boon for the Chinese Communist Party, enabling more centralized control of information around broader notions like “cyber-sovereignty,” and even turning news delivery devices, like smartphones, into tools of surveillance. This is a complex set of issues we won’t address in detail here. But suffice it to say that the media ecology in China has transformed dramatically since Xi Jinping came to power, for political, commercial, and social reasons—and few of these changes, at least so far, have been a net positive for professional journalism.

Since the 2013 incident, *Southern Weekly* has experienced a free fall in terms of social influence, the amount of quality investigative reporting, and revenue. The general (and very sad) observation is that this newspaper is now a mediocre publication and is becoming increasingly irrelevant in the public life of the Chinese. Most of the journalists who were at *Southern Weekly* in 2013 have quit their jobs. Some of them remain in journalism and work for other more digitally focused outlets, but many more are now public relations specialists at rapidly growing internet companies such as Alibaba and ByteDance (the company that owns Jinri Toutiao and Douyin), helping to maintain the positive images of these tech giants. No longer are they focused on uncovering hidden truths and holding power accountable. None of the journalists featured in this book are still working at *Southern Weekly*.

*Southern Weekly*’s fate is mirrored at other print publications across the country. We can say that the 2013 incident



signaled in part the decline of print journalism in China, and since 2013 scores of newspapers and magazines have been shut down, including such reputable titles as the *Beijing Times*, the *Shanghai Evening Post*, the *Oriental Morning Post*, the *International Herald Leader*, the *Outlook Magazine*, and the *Bund*. The advertising revenue of China's newspaper industry has declined at an annual rate of above 30 percent since 2014. For most traditional media outlets trying to make successful transitions, "media convergence" experiments have not for the most part been successful.

To put the China case in a broader context, we could say that the troubling times for *Southern Weekly* and other print media in China also reflect a global journalism crisis caused by technology innovations and the failure of existing business models. One crucial distinction, however, is that political controls on information in China, which are lately intensifying, have largely stymied any efforts to negotiate a new future for professional journalism using the tools and business models that the digital transition provides. The result of this hugely important shift is what one Chinese journalism professor recently termed, in a private conversation with the authors of this introduction, a "generational crisis in journalism," in which the professional gains Chinese media made over more than two decades are now rapidly being lost.

## WHERE NOW?

If we take a slightly less pessimistic view of developments in China, we can note that journalism is still practiced in China, and that it is increasingly emerging at new digital platforms and through new types of content creators.

First, there are newly launched digital media projects sponsored by the Party-state, with the Shanghai-based *Pengpai* (or *The Paper*) being perhaps the most prominent example. A major caveat here, of course, is that *Pengpai* and its counterparts in other provinces have an explicit propaganda role to play, being deployed to "occupy the online public opinion field" by producing and disseminating content acceptable to the authorities that can at the same time go viral on the internet—especially among younger audiences. Their goal, then, is not to produce investigative journalism. At the same time, we should recognize that these media, like their precursors in the 1990s, are also driven to attract public interest and top talent, and this is often impossible without finding some room for critical reporting. As a result, *Pengpai* and similar digital publications produce a mix of sleek propaganda and serious journalism, including some influential investigative pieces that have triggered nationwide attention—and the subsequent intervention of censors. In 2015, *Pengpai* ran an in-depth investigative report on the environmental costs of the Three Gorges Dam that was many months in production but unfortunately was deleted soon after it was posted. In March 2016, the outlet broke a story about a national vaccine scandal exposing regulatory failures that enabled some doctors and drug dealers to illegally distribute more than \$88 million in unrefrigerated and unsafe vaccines. After the story gained wide public attention, the propaganda department issued an order instructing other outlets not to rerun it.

Second, there is a new generation of media channels hosted by large internet portal websites such as Tencent, NetEase, and Sohu. Although they are not technically allowed to hire journalists to do original reporting, many of these channels still manage to push the envelope—"hitting line balls" is the Chinese phrase often used—and produce original content under the guise of the "special column," or through seemingly harmless genres such as "nonfiction writing." Some of the most prominent examples include Tencent's *Guyu* and NetEase's *Renjian*. In 2018, *Renjian* collaborated with independent journalist Huang Xueqin and exposed several sexual assault scandals amid China's #MeToo movement. *Guyu* also works with independent journalists, who in some cases have formed independent groups or collaboratives. One example is a team called Gushi Yinghe, an outfit for long-form journalism that includes many experienced journalists who used to work for traditional media outlets, including *Southern Weekly*.

Aside from these internet portals, there are a handful of tech websites in China that have also sought to produce serious journalism on social issues. One of the most prominent examples is Huxiu, which focuses on tech news but occasionally breaks out of this niche. In October 2018, Huxiu launched a special series called "New Women" that focused on gender equality in China.

Finally, there are hundreds of smaller and diverse players active on social media platforms that contribute to China's changing journalism landscape. They include individuals, volunteer groups, and small start-up companies. In August 2017, for example, a niche "publication" in the education industry called *Jiemosui* covered the mysterious death of a young man who had been involved in a pyramid scheme. In July 2018, a WeChat public account called "Shouye" that focused on the real estate sector exposed yet another vaccine scandal. The founder of "Shouye," in fact, is a former *Southern Weekly* journalist. While the journalist no longer does investigative reporting on a regular basis, his efforts are part of a more dispersed and guerrilla-style approach to journalism we see emerging across a wider array of platforms.

Admittedly, all of these outlets and channels are working within a gray area, and it is always conceivable that their initiatives could be suppressed by the authorities. But Chinese journalism has always existed in the gray, and it does provide

us with glimpses of various actors still working within the restrictions to advance their own professional and commercial agendas. As long as their work is tolerated, they continue to produce quality journalism that helps fill the void left by the decline of *Southern Weekly* and other media of the previous generation.

Finally, we should recognize and encourage the brave and professional reporting done in the midst of the novel coronavirus pandemic in 2020 by a small but decisive core of dedicated Chinese journalists. In-depth reports from such outlets as Caixin Media, Sanlian Life Weekly, Yicai Daily, the Economic Observer, Southern Metropolis Daily and China's People magazine, to name just a few, provided crucial details about the spread of the virus and about the failures and oversights in the official response. They offered more factual, authentic, and human perspectives on the epidemic and its impact, which often belied the official state narratives of unity, heroism, and faultless leadership. A few smaller start-up media initiatives focusing on public health such as Dingxiang Yisheng and Badian Jianwen provided science-based and policy-relevant reporting.

At some points in the crisis, there were even noticeable shades of the resistance seen during the Southern Weekly incident almost exactly seven years earlier—seen in the determined and creative resistance by Chinese media and internet users against both censorship and propaganda. One of the clearest examples came during Xi Jinping's March 10, 2020, visit to the city of Wuhan, the epicenter of the crisis, as positive state propaganda inundated the media space. Social media users in China struck back against the tide of falsehood by sharing an already censored cover story from People magazine in which Wuhan doctor Ai Fen shared her regrets at having allowed herself to be silenced by authorities in December 2019 over the true dangers of the emerging epidemic. As this damning story about the initial government cover-up was itself expunged from WeChat and other social media, users struck back by reposting it in myriad forms in attempts to elude censorship—using only emoticons, reading the entire story aloud on audio platforms, posting the story in romanized form, translating it into Korean (which could be auto-translated back into Chinese), and even rendering it in unique four-digit telegram codes.<sup>[16]</sup>

The title of this book is *Silencing Chinese Media*. In light of the complicated and ongoing contest between the taming force of the Party-state and the determination of professional journalists (and conscientious citizens) to expose the facts and make themselves heard, perhaps this title is best understood not as a pessimistic verdict, but rather as an open question about the future of Chinese voices—and their determination, against all odds, not to be silenced.

## NOTES

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