THE POPULAR PRESS AND
ITS PUBLIC IN CHINA

HSIAO-WEN LEE

Abstract

The result of media reform in China has led to the profit-driven popular press, instead of the Party press, developing rapidly and heavily influencing the public life in the country. How do the people negotiate with the political power and form their own "public" in daily life through reading the popular press? On the one hand, as the ordinary Chinese people keep their distance from public affairs, they fail to respond to the coverage that is always controlled by the power of the state; this leads to people's dissent from or indifference to the headlines or important news in the popular press. On the other hand, compared with the stuffy and always-positive news of propaganda that is far from their daily lives, trivial news happens under circumstances that are more sensible and meaningful for them. People refer to their reason and sense in daily life to criticise what the truth is. In the meantime, the "public" is aroused through controversy and disagreement.

Hsiao-wen Lee is a PhD Candidate at Communication and Media Research Institute, University of Westminster, London; e-mail: hsiaowentw@gmail.com.

This paper aims to examine a question: is there a Chinese popular public sphere that is organised around a specific Chinese notion of the structure of the public? I conducted a survey with the readership of the popular press in Beijing and Kunming. Through dialog with readers, this paper argues that, on the one hand, the diversity of the popular press definitely provides more content for Chinese readers than the Party press yet, on the other hand, readers are suspicious of the contents. This paper uses focus groups to collect opinions on political affairs and to examine how "the public" is framed by their reading of the popular press in everyday life in contemporary China.

In China, there are 39 press groups and more than 2,000 newspapers (Tang 2005b). These 39 press groups publish 271 newspapers whose total circulation accounts for one third of the market share in China. Each press group, on average, has seven kinds of publications, ranging from the Party press to an evening press, a market press, weekly newsletters, and so on.

The traditional Party newspapers are used by the political authorities to serve as a propaganda vehicle, but the new popular newspapers must attract their target audiences and advertisers to support themselves financially. Although the latter belong to the same press group as the Party press, their editorial policy, management, and marketing strategies are totally different. Further, these new, popular newspapers have outperformed their mother newspaper (the Party press) in both circulation and profit, and have reached the leading position in the press group. They have more critical news coverage and, hence, great possibilities for the provocation of public debates. However, the authorities still strictly impose the state ideology on all members of the press.

The Public and Mediated Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere is a dynamic rather than a fixed, single notion. In different states and different societies, debates about the public sphere continue. Habermas argues:

> *The public sphere itself appears as a specific domain – the public domain versus the private. Sometimes the public appears simply as that sector of public opinion that happens to be opposed to the authorities. Depending on the circumstances, either the organs of the state or the media, like the press, which provide communication among members of the public, may be counted as public organ.* (Habermas 1989, 2)

Definitions of the pubic sphere are quite varied, for example:

Firstly, the public sphere can be seen as an open space or a space representative of the people. "The public" can mean the general public, consisting of citizens who possess the ability to reason, discriminate between, or reflect on their views and opinions (Peters 1995). Alternatively it is an open space or forum in which people can discuss public affairs freely and openly even though they may oppose the authority of the State.

Secondly, the public sphere can be seen as a "carrier" of public opinion. If the public is a body of reasoning citizens and marked by rational discourse, it can also be seen as a collection of varying public opinions. This public opinion may also be influenced by the pressure of legitimisation, newspapers, mass media, or even the social (context) atmosphere. Therefore, what the public is comprised of can be quite controversial in this sense.

Thirdly, the public sphere can be seen as the symbol of authority or the sphere of public authority. For example, the State is the public authority. In this sense, the public authority is all the symbols of the State representing authority, as opposed to the positions of the private sector and the general population. The public authority is also represented in several differing forms such as the court system, government institutions and buildings, public organs, or public officials.

Fourthly, the public sphere can be seen as society. The civic society is the arena of uncoerced collective action focused around shared interests, places, purposes, or values. These civic societies are often populated by organisations such as charities, non-governmental development organisations, community groups, and so on. It is a society independent and separate from the state represented, for example, by coffee houses and salons. In other words, these are safe places where passionate disagreement can take place.

Fifthly, the public sphere can be seen as the main sphere of influence. In mass society, the mass circulation press is based around commercialisation and participation in the public sphere, and in general gives the masses access to the public sphere. Although Habermas (1989, 169) thinks this expanded public sphere has lost its political character, this new consuming public has replaced the bourgeois reading public. The public of the mass media has exploded and pushed the old public aside from below (out of the working class) and from outside (from the rural population) (Habermas 1989, 173).

According to the discussions above, the public can be engaged through three notions in this research:

(1) Collective behaviour: The public is not only a concept, but an action that collects will and opinions. Through collective behaviour, an issue can be addressed and consciousness is simultaneously raised.

(2) Controversy: It is also very important to have debates and to continually form the public in the process. Crucially, disagreement is a vital element in reaching rational debates and true public opinion. Disagreement contributes to people's ability to generate reason (Price et al. 2002). Price adopts Blumer's analysis and suggests that disagreement and discussion around a particular issue bring a public into existence. Blumer (1946, 189) pointed out that, like the crowd, the public is "lacking in the characteristic features of a society." Then, argument and counterargument become the means by which public opinion is shaped. The mass is geographically dispersed, more loosely organised than the crowd or the public, and its members are unable to act in concert. Due to the mass media, Price (1992) thinks there is little true public discussion in modern political life.

(3) Communication: Public opinion can be viewed as part of a larger sociological process, as a mechanism through which stable societies adapt to changing circumstances via discussion and debate. In essence, the public is a constant process of communication.

In the following discussions, I will use these definitions of the public integrating the Chinese notion to trace the public and its transformation in China.

China's Public and Its Transformation

There are two aspects in terms of China's public, cultural and historical perspective, and political and social perspective. They have different transformations respectively but shape what the public consists of in China in the meantime.

From a cultural and historical perspective, Chen (2003) traces the public from Chinese history, society, and political affairs and divides it into five kinds of accounts. In China, the public is named by the character of *Gong*. First and most anciently, the public meant the government, the authority, state or public affairs. In contrast, the private referred to civilians, the popular or folk. Secondly, the public represented general interests, or the whole, unity, and non-selfishness. The private, in the negative sense, was viewed as selfishness or ego-centrism. Thirdly, the public meant the gods or the nature of justice rather than common interests. It commended great virtue, while the private was viewed as only personal desires. Fourthly, although the public is still viewed as the general interests and unity, it comes from the collection of individual private. That is, the individual private citizen is the legitimate basis of the public. The private is not a negative term in that sense. Fifthly, the public is the areas of common affairs in political, patriarchal, and social life. In this sense, the private means personal interests.

According to Chen's accounts, the crucial thought in China is that the public is viewed as a kind of moral code, rather than as an idea of communication in society. The public and the private are always put on two opposite sides. The former is commended while, in sharp contrast, the latter is despised.

From a political and social perspective following Communist rule in China, Communism had tried to shape the proletarian public through the Party media, which is opposite to the bourgeois public. But Yan (2003) has analysed the transformation of private lives in China's rural villages for half a century (1949-1999). He argues that in the age of collectivisation, the state tried to promote collectivism and to shift the loyalty of villagers from the family to the collectives and, ultimately, to the state. But when collectivism quickly collapsed and the state withdrew from many aspects of social life, no more supporting either traditional values or socialist morality, villagers faced a moral and ideological vacuum in the post-collective era. Finally, instead of commodity production and the value of capitalism, Yan (2003) thinks that the younger generations were left with only ego-centred consumerism. In other words, there individuals have no thought of civic duty or citizenship, but place absolute emphasis on individual interests and desires. This disjunction continues in both the public and private sphere in contemporary China.

In addition, there is a socio-political culture in China that can be called invisible rules, like the "hidden road" in the West. Wu (2004a; 2004b) argues that these invisible rules have definitely operated amongst Chinese for thousands of years. He analyses the ancient history of several dynasties and concludes that the implications of the invisible rules are: (1) Invisible rules are the apparent and informal rules beneath formal regulation that restrict individuals in certain behaviours. (2) Stemming from social interaction, these restricted rules reduce costs and conflicts when individuals interact with each other. (3) The true meaning of this restraint is that, once someone breaks the rules, he will face undesirable consequences for his disloyalty. It is in this presupposition that the invisible rules are founded. However, (4) these invisible rules are against formal justice rules and violate the main ideology or legitimate rights, so these invisible rules can only exist in the dark – but they are still recognised by all. (5) Finally, the most important thing is that people put formal regulations below invisible rules. They use the invisible rules as chips to derive benefits which they cannot have under formal regulation.

Official jargon, therefore, similar to spin in the Western sense, is often viewed as a tactic of camouflage. No one takes it seriously in practice. Nevertheless, officials have to voice this jargon often to protect their own position and benefits. Wu (2004a) thinks that the most serious problem with the invisible rules is that they lead to legitimate violence and flagrant violations of the formal rules. In the meantime, the invisible rules have become the true rules, both individuals and public officials use the violation of formal rules to derive huge benefits. and this has become a general phenomenon. In the end, people who have the power to use excessive violence own the right to define the invisible rules. These rules, meanwhile, are used instead of formal regulation to enable a society to work more efficiently.

Sun (2007) thinks that the concept of invisible rules is so significant that, instead of the official rules, they currently dominate the state and society. This also explains why corruption in the government is increasing and cannot be curbed efficiently. For example, Sun says there was once serious corruption in Lanzhou County, where more than seventy officials were arrested, including the head of the county and the party leader. Ironically, at his inauguration, the new party leader said that this serious problem had occurred because all of the officials were disunited. In other words, if everyone had followed the invisible rule, the corruption would not have been revealed.

Briefly, the public, in this Chinese context, is shaped on the one hand by the reasons of the authorities, which are never viewed seriously by ordinary people or even the officials themselves and, on the other, is formed by individual emotions and desires. The invisible rules have crucial impacts on what ordinary people think about the public in their daily lives. Hence, in the next section I will use the Chinese notion of the public to present how readers engage with and comment on the news in the popular press, then produce the reasoning public, a dynamic process of the public.

Research Methods

I chose two cities for the field work: Beijing and Kunming. Beijing is the metropolitan city in China which represents the central government, a symbol of the powerful State. Therefore, most well-educated people (senior high school and university graduates) work and live here, and its immigrants come from all over China. The population of Beijing is over fifteen million. By contrast, Kunming City is located in the remote Southwest area, the capital of Yunnan province, with a population near six million, but its populace and educational demography (primary school and high school) are more similar to most other cities in China. These two places can represent the requirements of this research's targets.

There are eight focus groups with sixty people in this survey. The people in the focus groups are divided into white collars workers (WCW) and blue collars workers (BCW) (see Appendix). Each group contains six to eight people on average, and they are chosen by a survey of the social stratification. This technique also shows where the social conflicts come from.

In 1949, class was defined by politics, family, and occupation in China. The main function of the class label (Lee 2006) is to provoke political movement, and to define one's life condition and social position. This system is designed, operated, and supported by either the state authorities or different administration de-

partments. The system was called "the struggle of class." At the end of the 1970s, when the government announced the cessation of the struggle of class, ironically, commercial interests and private society were elements of the official discourse of class. Lee (2006) thinks that "bring[ing] class back in" is a very important issue in the transformation of the working class in a pre-capitalist country. Before 1978, there was no clear relationship or difference between occupation and social economic position in China. When industrial growth rapidly occurred, the gaps and differences in social economic positions became serious and led to many conflicts in contemporary Chinese society (Li and Chen 2004).

Li and Chen (2004) analysed social stratification after 1978, during the development of marketisation, at which time managers gained the authoritative, dominant positions in large commercial institutions and government organisations. They controlled the resources and enforced their power, which made the poverty gap more serious. A survey of social stratification divides contemporary China into ten strata, which are:

Table 1: Ten Social Strata in Contemporary China

Managers of the bureaucratic state	2.1%
Managers	1.6%
Owners of private enterprises	1.0%
Specialists	4.6%
General staff	7.2%
Personal business	7.1%
Commercial services	11.2%
Industry workers	17.5%
Agricultural workers or farmers	42.9%
Laid-off workers, unemployed people	4.8%

(Based on information from Lu 2004, 13)

In order to fulfil the aim of this research, I focus on two themes, corruption and injustice. These two topics are highly relevant to politics and the legal system. In Beijing, many critiques are focused on the deficits in personal rights and public interests, in which the government does not make an equal and well managed environment for people. In Kunming, people are more focused on discussing the corruption surrounding the events of Hu Xing and traffic accidents, i.e., public issues. Through critiques of politics and the legal system, this research attempted to see how China's public might be shaped by China's notions of invisible rules, moral codes, and personal desires. This process also presents the dynamic concepts of the public, controversy, communication, and collective behaviour. Therefore, the principle of the quotes is particularly focus on people's attitudes towards news coverage and what causes make them believe or not believe the political and legal system. There are three stages in the discussions: the first thoughts of the participants about the coverage of corruption or social injustice; the participants' linking the news coverage to individual experiences and observations; finally, that the news coverage will be re-explained and become a reasonable truth in people's mind.

How does the commercialising popular press impact public opinion? In Tang's survey (2005a), media consumption played an increased role in promoting both

political activism and efficacy from 1993 to 2000. The media served to promote political stability by discouraging open challenge to the regime and by encouraging intra-system participation. Tang (2005a, 191) concludes that China's authoritarian political system clearly has a significant role in manipulating public opinion and in curbing mass political behaviour. However, popular dissatisfaction with the cost of market reform was growing in China as the world moved toward democratisation (Tang 2005a, 192). Furthermore, voicing public opinion at the grassroots level was surprisingly common, and the state actually reduced its efforts to control public opinion and behaviour at that level.

Invisible Rule Negotiates with Political Power

Due to the deficit in interaction and communication, the concept of public is weak in contemporary China. Moreover, the influences of the invisible rules lead to people's distrust of the politician and of political affairs. People always treat coverage of public affairs as propaganda, in particular, news about corruption. White collar readers particularly did not believe the corruption reports from the media. Within most discussions, the coverage was portrayed as propaganda resulting from political struggles, evident in statements such as "media serves authority" and "there is a lack of the balance of power in reality," as well as in the use of defensive terms such as *cliché*, as in "I just see it as a *cliché* in our daily lives." Readers' descriptions, then, corresponded with the critics in terms of these invisible rules for the public. This was evident in discussion of the coverage of Hu Xing's[1] corruption, a hot issue but of low credibility. A description from a 38-year-old public official in forestry (W-7) is one of the typical answers representing the mechanism of invisible rules, legitimate violation, and the back room in politics. He, a political official, did not believe this coverage and guessed that there must be something obscure behind it.

> W-7: I won't read the coverage of breaking news at the beginning because all coverage is far behind what is happening. For example, in the beginning, I was curious about how Hu Xing's corruption was shielded but there must be someone behind him … However, the coverage still did not reveal how much money he grafted every time or details of his extradition from Singapore. We know a lot of similar cases which have never been exposed to the public.

Obviously, this is tacit knowledge, that most people are very well aware of how the invisible rules work. In particular, people have a huge advantage through these invisible rules instead of formal regulation. The groups of blue collar workers always sent a satirical message through their attitudes when we discussed the coverage of corruption. Being from the lower class, they hardly derived any benefit from the invisible rules defined by upper authority. A 32-year-old newsvendor (Z-1), who has only graduated from junior high school, made his fortune in the stock market. He is an advocate of liberalism, and stressed that his success had depended on his own ability, while others used invisible rules to obtain bribes.

> Interviewer: Why is the Hu Xing incident reported widely?
>
> Z-1: We ordinary people never know it. The answer is only in the mind of upper authority. The official's corruption is a confirmed and deep-rooted problem in China. In my opinion, it is the result of political struggle, something very ordinary. If anyone has "a little" common

sense in our society, he definitely would "network'" with the county's head or the party's leader. How "glorious" that is! A typical Chinese sadness. … to me, I have the ability to make money from the stock market and gain respect from some upper officials, my customers.

Interviewer: Did you see any media criticism of the bureaucracy?

Z-1: Whatever critiques there are useless! … the press criticised these problems in the government of course, but those political officials just turned a deaf ear to them and took no heed of these critiques. As I said, if one of my relatives was a head of a county or a province, he could do anything, any business, and there would be no problem at all … These things disgust me! I can trade freely in the stock market. However, I still need to find ways to protect my own rights.

This successful newsvendor was very angry when he told me his thoughts on authority and officials. The same descriptions were repeated in other groups of blue collar workers when they talked about corruption. Their defiance explained their suffering in this society. The evidence is in the description of two blue collar workers – their satirical attitudes revealed their dissatisfaction. Because Hu Xing was a formal transport official in Kunming, he used informal tactics to ask his younger brother to bid on lands that had building restrictions, and gained huge benefits. His actions led to many complaints. A 50-year-old retired vendor (Y-5) said, "This is the negative and dark side of our society, that is, if someone has a particular relation, ironically, it seems a kind of honour of his" (Y-5 raised his tone). Indeed, this is the result of the invisible rule: he who has power is he who defines the rules, while blue collar workers are excluded. So corruption, such as forming a specific and united interests group, cannot be solved seriously. Ironically, the authority now appeals for a harmonious society. A 40-year-old cleaner (U-1) used this slogan and said, therefore, all corrupt officials would be "harmonised, harmonised, harmonised!" (He repeated this word many times to scoff at the authorities.)

Because people believed authority controlled the media, they realised that journalists also had to obey invisible rules to keep their jobs. Because one regulation of the invisible rules is that a person has to pay a big cost when he breaks a rule, somehow blue collar workers were in sympathy with the journalists and even forgave them for their reports.

Z-1: According to my observations, if the headline news is the official stands down for his corruption, newspapers are sold out very soon on that day. This is because this kind of (corruption) news is always blocked by authority. However, one of my friends working on a magazine says he knows this kind of coverage is a good sales story, but if we report this story, our magazine will be closed down by the authorities sooner or later.

The 50-year-old female taxi driver (Y-6) said:

Yes, the media is very important. The media addresses some problems and informs the public. However, some journalists are afraid of losing their job by doing so. We can only depend on the individual journalist's sense of justice.

Some of these workers, on the one hand, criticised corruption news angrily and did not believe any coverage, as they thought there must be conspiracies. On the other hand, they used their common sense to judge how the invisible rule was

exercised. According to Sun (2007), the invisible rule as an alternative rule practically operates society. The systematic invisible rule has destroyed the formal rule and become the cause of illegal activities. Sun uses the term "Mafia" to explain how much worse the situation would become in society if the alternative rule was abandoned. As a result, the powerful people, such as the authorities, would become more and more arbitrary and rude. They would even use violence to bully powerless people, e.g., the authorities could tear down civilians' houses by force, or collaborate with the boss of a mine to exploit the workers. Sun thinks this is now the cause of a series of increasingly violent acts.

Crucially, the invisible rule leads ordinary people to distrust the authorities and to keep a suspicious attitude when reading political news.

The Alienation of the Public and the True Public

In my interviews, most participants used very strongly negative descriptions to express their thoughts on the popular press, such as "I do not care," "I feel apathy" or "Whatever the coverage said, I totally did not believe it." The majority of readers' reasons were "the authorities control the news" and "the popular press serves the interests of specific groups." They tended to reinforce their stance and opinions about controversial or tragic news. Two young white collar workers in Beijing talked about their first impressions and why they did not believe the coverage. A 30-year-old high school teacher (S-2) said that newspapers never gave him any good impressions. On the one hand, they always used bloody and sensational methods to catch readers' eyes. On the other, he said, there was a very serious problem – most newsworthy events are blocked by China's government.

> S-2: For example, one of my friends went to court with a semi-official Chinese literature and art alliance. After the verdict was announced, the alliance released the news to newspapers. In the meantime, my friend also wanted to release news, but the press rejected his request and said the alliance did not allow them to publish his story. The other friend told me that, when he studied journalism in university, his teacher said the most important thing is the discipline, and the truth is far behind.

He used his experiences to explain how the government blocked news and the individual had a difficult struggle with authority and its adherents. The other respondent, a 28-year-old engineer (S-5) in a mobile phone company, did not appreciate the opinion of experts in the press, as they did not represent the ordinary people. He said: "To ordinary people, realities and actions are the most important things." Because newspapers seldom interview ordinary people, they often used the opinions of experts. This young engineer said: "These opinions of experts don't represent public opinions most of the time … Their opinions are not from we ordinary people." Consequently, these young professionals judged a thing by depending on their common sense rather than on opinions from experts in the press. The 30-year-old teacher (S-2) stressed his comment. He furthermore explained what common sense is:

> For example, there was a controversy between fresh milk and canned milk. All arguments from the experts were just to protect different interests groups and serve their benefits in business. To me, I know this issue but am apathetic.

However, did they really not care, or did they remain apathetic to the political events in their society? Not necessarily! In a fast-increasing marketised society, there are too many political events and public problems to face and solve. As to what roles the press should perform, the majority of responses were "supervision" and "the advocates of powerless ordinary people." In other words, people expected the popular press to do more for ordinary people than for the authorities. This was evident in my interview with blue collar workers in Kunming when they spontaneously began to talk about a traffic accident. The story is: last year, a traffic accident happened in Dongfeng Square (in central downtown Kunming). Four people were killed in a car accident and twenty-three people were injured. Most coverage did not report the details of why the car crashed into the crowd and why the driver immediately disappeared. After the accident, the authorities found a scapegoat then identified him as being intermittently mentally ill. He was released from custody very soon. The 50-year-old female taxi driver (Y-6) spoke out about this story based on her experiences. She said:

> What a silly thing! It was incredible, because this guy actually worked as a driver in a government institution. If he was not qualified, it would have been impossible to work there for more than twenty years … If this accident happened to us, ordinary people, we could not escape the sentence so easily.

The 50-year-old retired vendor (Y-5), therefore, stressed the inequality between the authorities and ordinary people. He says "The authorities would confiscate our property if we were responsible." A 45-year-old female newsvendor (Y-3) listened attentively and said: "I heard little about the details of this news. I knew little about it. In my memory, some customers said the coverage was not true. Many people were angry because the suspect was not sentenced." Coverage of the accident was unclear in the press. The witness, a female driver, told this story to persuade the others.

A group of white collar workers also mentioned this traffic accident and how they identified this news event. They felt this accident revealed the inequality between powerless people and the absolutely powerful authorities. Contrary to the apathy they expressed verbally, these discussions showed their concerns with public affairs, especially when the story was close to their daily lives.

> A 36-year-old female doctor (W-6): Last year, there was a very serious traffic accident but the news was blocked in the end. On the first day, all newspapers reported this news event ardently, however, on the second and the third days, all news almost disappeared, because the suspect has already been identified as a mental patient.

> A 36-year-old female manager (W-5): Once they identified he was mentally ill, then he was released. Like nothing had happened.

This story caused a 38-year-old public official in forestry (W-7) to speak out on a similar case that also happened last year. The story is that Xi Mountain in Kunming was tragically burned. He said: "It was a big joke! This kind of 'political' fire is always blamed on a mentally sick person by the authorities." Ironically, for this accident, the Kunming government immediately passed a law to deal with mentally ill arsonists. The public official stressed: "I bet that was the quickest law passed compared to others, which need a long time to examine … The coverage

only had positive news, which is about how difficult it is for the fire-fighters!" Then, a 36-year-old female manager (W-5) concluded: "Regarding efficiency, the government was not slow. Just sometimes they did not want to do something efficiently." Obviously, these respondents did care about, and had strong opinions on, public affairs.

The most interesting thing to me was when a retired general manager in an electronic factory said in the beginning that he totally did not believe the coverage. Still, he confirmed two of the pieces under review in the popular press, because finally they spoke out about the complaints of ordinary people.

> W-2: There were only two comments I agreed with that we read in newspapers. It rather spoke out about the thinking of our general public. One was about the administration problem in the Dian Lake, about the pollution there; and the other was the pay rises of the working class. The comment did not believe the pay rises were as much as the government said.

The first comment explained the waste and corruption of the authority. A 76-year-old retired police official (W-1) also said:

> It is a big problem that the Dian Lake clean up needs so much money, but we see no effect. In newspapers there is no supervision of this government. It almost cost ten hundreds of million RMD, too awful!

The next comment revealed the serious social problem in the process of marketisation. In my interviews, the problems of inflation were mentioned again and again by ordinary people, particularly retired people and laid-off workers. They told me about their hard life, and they expected the popular press to fight for their rights. For example, a 47-year-old unemployed female worker (Z-5) repeatedly told me her pension was only three hundred RMD per month. "How could I bring up my child," she asked. So when she read the corruption coverage, it made her extremely angry from time to time.

As Price et al. (2002) state, dissent and disagreement contributes to the generation of a rationale. Through my interviews and the discussions, the picture of the public became more and more genuine and clear. The fact that they criticised the notion that the sense of the public defined by the authorities has little to do with ordinary people did not mean that they didn't care about the true sense of the public. From their reading experiences, people somehow had the consciousness to judge political and public things, which they said came from their common sense.

Conclusions

Generally, virtually no group or class was satisfied with the authorities, but the reasons are quite diverse. For example, the political slogans of a harmonious society are: to reduce income inequality, create more jobs, improve access to education, and so on. However, blue-collar workers think of "harmony" as camouflage for corruption and harmonisation of illegal activities in the government. The purpose of this policy, to them, just strengthens the control of the authorities. These thoughts are the opposite of the aim of the slogans. In other words, most of the crises facing the legitimate system come from the distrust of the ordinary people. This contradictory mindset happens among blue-collar workers, particularly the immigrant labourers, who are the most powerless and exploited group in the economic development and

yet also the most obedient group. Among young BCWs in Beijing, most participants keep silent or concur with the official coverage.

By contrast, white-collar workers also distrust and keep a distance from news coverage and political affairs but still take action to negotiate with media or government departments when their rights have been harmed. WCWs are more critical of the legal rights they cannot exercise. Compared with BCWs, the popular public sphere among WCWs varies in the extremes between standing by the government and standing by ordinary people. For example, in Kunming, a police official (X-2) supports the legitimate system, which he says should be respected for punishing those who break the law. But, a lawyer (X-3) criticises the law for harming rather than protecting the populace in Kunming. In Beijing, a retired professor from a central Party school (T-4) thinks the government should have the responsibility to take care of the needs of the poor and return to the days of collectivism when everyone was equal. By contrast, a professional accountant (T-2) emphasises that the government should be more open and visible to ordinary people and should not have such powerful rights without supervision in Beijing.

These controversies also show that although the transformation of China's society is facing a variety of new challenges, the old bureaucratic machinery is still required to operate society. This is the dilemma and the cause of much controversy in contemporary Chinese society. Briefly, although the government public sphere still dominates society and media coverage, the controversies around the popular public sphere and multiple opinions have come as the result of the economic reforms and the rise of popular newspapers.

In terms of the concept of the public in China, it is still paradoxical. I conclude therefore that there are three dimensions to what the public now means for the ordinary people when they read the popular press and when they replied to this research's targets, the process of a dynamic public:

(1) Disengagement: Newspaper headlines are not always linked to ordinary people, obviously. People doubt and keep a distance from the coverage, or even treat it as a joke, a cliché. The official concept of the public is not welcomed by the general public at all. This disconnection refers to invisible rules and statements such as "the authority must block the coverage," "media serves the government," and "opinions of the experts are for the specific interests groups in the press." Because of this presupposition, people do not believe the press and feel apathy towards the coverage, in particular on political and public affairs. Whatever the coverage said, therefore, people always read between the lines.

(2) Re-engagement: Undeniably, on the one hand, people negotiate with the political power with distrust, but on the other they also use common sense and experience to map the picture of news events. They share their ethics with other people and so frame a public in their minds. In this alternative approach, the public has been reconnected. For instance, although most of them said they were indifferent to political affairs and did not believe any of the coverage, they still criticised very clearly or agreed with some coverage when the coverage coordinated with people's comments. They were also very willing to share their experiences with others and to use their moral code of common sense to trace the truth, such as in the case of the story about the traffic accident and the political fire on Xi Mountain. This reveals that people do care and have strong opinions about coverage rather than being indifferent.

(3) The genuine public: The coverage of the popular press sometimes satisfies the appetites of ordinary people, though some sensitive issues are very soon blocked by the authorities. However, they somehow definitely catch their readers' eyes and provoke their debates. Comparing the stuffy coverage of political news or events in the press, people expect journalists to speak for their needs or opinions; i.e., they did not like the opinions of the experts. They also deliberately calculate what issues do not get attention in newspapers and know very well the culture of the invisible rule. The evidence in the discussion of the corruption coverage showed that they did not believe the authorities dealt with corruption problems seriously and that there must have been a conspiracy or scandal behind it. Stuffy and positive news brings opposite effects from those the government desires, because people refer to their everyday reason and sense to criticise the truth. In the meantime, the public has been aroused through controversy and disagreement.

The public is a dynamic process in contemporary China. As for whether the controversy and disagreement of the public in reading experiences could result in efficient communication and negotiation with the authorities in the future, this is beyond my research.

Note:

1. An ex-formal transport official in southwest China's Yunnan Province, who fled to Singapore, was extradited back to China, and sentenced to life in prison for corruption. He was convicted of abusing his authority to take more than 40 million yuan (5.3 million U.S. dollars) in bribes.

References:

Blumer, Herbert. 1946. Collective Behaviour. In A. M. Lee (ed.), *New Outlines of the Principles of Sociology*, 167-222. New York: Barnes and Noble.

Chen, Jie. 2003. 中國歷史上公的概念及其現代變形 [Conceptions of Gong: A Typological and Holistic Approach to the Chinese Version of "Public".] *SOCIETAS: A Journal for Philosophical Study of Public Affairs* 7, 87-144.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society.* Cambridge: Polity.

Lee, Ching Kwan. 2006. 中國工人階級的轉型政治 [The Changing of China's Labour Class]. In Y. Li, L. P. Sun and Y. Shen (eds.), *Social Stratification of Contemporary China*, 55-88. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.

Li, Jun and Guangjin Chen. 2004. 十大社會階層的劃分[Classification of Ten Social Strata]. In X. Lu (ed.), *Social Mobility in Contemporary China,* 21-32. Beijing: Social Sciences Documentation Publishing House.

Park, Robert E. 1904/1972. *The Crowd and the Public and Other Essays.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Peters, John D. 1995. Historical Tensions in the Concept of Public Opinion. In T. L. Glasser and C. T. Salmon (eds.), *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent*, 3-32. New York: The Guilford Press.

Price, Vincent. 1992. *Public Opinion*. London: Sage.

Price, Vincent, Joseph N. Cappella and Lilach Nir. 2002. Does Disagreement Contribute to More Deliberative Opinion? *Political Communication* 19, 1, 95-112.

Splichal, Slavko. 2001. Publicity, Democracy and Public Opinion. In S. Splichal (ed.). *Public Opinion and Democracy: Vox Populi-Vox Dei?*, 21-53. USA: Hampton Press, Inc.

Sun, Liping. 2007.守衛底線 [*Minimal Responsibility – Basic Order of Social Life in Transformation of Chinese Society*]. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.

Tang, Wenfang. 2005a. *Public Opinion and Political Change in China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Tang, Xujun 2005b. 中國報業集團: 在探索中前進 [China's Newspaper Group-advancements within Exploration]. In B. Cui (ed.), *Blue Book of China's Media 2004-2005*, 106-114. China: Social Sciences Academic Press.

Wu, S. 2004a. 隱蔽的秩序 [*The Invisible Rule: Exploring the Transition of History*]. China: Hai Nan Publication Press.

Wu, S. 2004b. 血酬定律 [*The Bloody Rewards and the Invisible Rules*]. China: China's Worker Press.

Yan, Yunxiang. 2003. *Private Life Under Socialism – Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Appendix: The timeline and people in focus groups

Group Title: S
Social grouping: "White collar" workers
Date: 21 April 2007
Time and duration: 10:00, 1.5 hours
Location: Sculpting Timeout coffee shop

Participant Code	Occupation	Age	Gender
S-1	Accounting	27	female
S-2	High school teacher	30	male
S-3	High school teacher	29	female
S-4	Public official in Beijing government	27	female
S-5	Engineer in foreign mobile phone company	28	male
S-6	Staff in foreign insurance company	31	male
S-7	Engineer in foreign electric company	26	female
S-8	Customer service in foreign internet company	24	female

Group Title: T
Social grouping: "White collar" workers
Date: 7 May 2007
Time and duration: 19.30, 2.0 hours
Location: Sculpting Timeout coffee shop

Participant Code	Occupation	Age	Gender
T-1	Technology researcher in semi-government unit	40	male
T-2	Accountant	43	female
T-3	Professor	42	male
T-4	Retired professor from central Party school	65	female
T-5	Retired railway general engineer	65	male
T-6	Administration staff in university	32	female
T-7	PhD student in Beijing University	26	male
T-8	IT engineer	24	male

Group Title: U
Social grouping: "Blue collar" workers
Date: 27 May 2007
Time and duration: 10.00, 1.5 hours
Location: China Youth College for Political Science

Participant Code	Occupation	Age	Gender
U-1	Cleaner	40	male
U-2	Cleaner	47	male
U-3	Worker in boiler unit	41	male
U-4	Worker	45	female
U-5	Worker	54	female
U-6	Cleaner	43	female
U-7	Worker	50	female
U-8	Worker	52	female

Group Title: V
Social grouping: "Blue collar" workers
Date: 27 May 2007
Time and duration: 15.00, 2.0 hours
Location: China Youth College for Political Science

Participant Code	Occupation	Age	Gender
V-1	Staff in private company	27	female
V-2	Newspaper vendor	24	female
V-3	Sales	24	male
V-4	Telephone vender	23	male
V-5	Vendor	21	male
V-6	Cleaner	33	male
V-7	Worker in moving company	32	male
V-8	Security guard	30	male
V-9	Worker in warehouse	24	male

Group Title: W
Social grouping: "White collar" workers
Date: 21 July 2007
Time and duration: 14.30, 2.0 hours
Location: Meeting Room 13F at *Yunnan Daily*

Participant Code	Occupation	Age	Gender
W-1	Retired superintendent	76	Male
W-2	Retired general manager in power factory	67	Male
W-3	Teacher	24	Female
W-4	Air transportation manager	39	Female
W-5	Air transportation manager	36	Female
W-6	Doctor	36	Female
W-7	Public official in local government	38	Male
W-8	PhD student	24	Male
W-9	Local tour guide	29	Male

Group Title: X
Social grouping: "White collar" workers
Date: 28 July 2007
Time and duration: 15:00, 2.0 hours
Location: Meeting Room 13F at *Yunnan Daily*

Participant Code	Occupation	Age	Gender
X-1	Teacher in college	43	Female
X-2	Supt (Superintendent)	43	Male
X-3	Lawyer	33	Male
X-4	Doctor	42	Male
X-5	Doctor	43	Female
X-6	Doctor	41	Female

Group Title: Y
Social grouping: "Blue collar" workers
Date: 20 July 2007
Time and duration: 14.30, 2.0 hours
Location: Meeting Room 13F at *Yunnan Daily*

Participant Code	Occupation	Age	Gender
Y-1	Sales	27	Male
Y-2	Hairdresser	23	Male
Y-3	News stand worker	45	Female
Y-4	Housewife	27	Female
Y-5	Retired street vendor	50	Male
Y-6	Taxi driver	50	Female

Group Title: Z
Social grouping: "Blue collar" workers
Date: 27 July 2007
Time and duration: 15:00, 2.0 hours
Location: Meeting Room 13F at *Yunnan Daily*

Participant Code	Occupation	Age	Gender
Z-1	Stock market investor	32	Male
Z-2	Taxi driver	47	Male
Z-3	Laid-off worker	47	Female
Z-4	Laid-off worker	57	Female
Z-5	Laid-off worker	47	Female
Z-6	Massage worker	20	Female