Constructing the Hero:
Nationalistic News Narratives in Contemporary China

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Abstract
This article explores how, in times of crisis, Chinese journalism is still heavily influenced by the Maoist era in which the news media served as the mouthpiece for government propaganda. From the seasonal flooding of China's great rivers to international controversies such as the 2001 US Spy-Plane incident, China's state-controlled media has called upon a complex interweaving of Chinese 'values' incorporating them into a patriotic narrative of nation-building. In times of adversity these familiar narratives operate within conceptual frameworks that serve to mobilise the masses and, ultimately, present a positive outcome in which 'the enemy' (a foreign aggressor, corrupt official or Mother Nature) is defeated. China's struggle against its foes becomes embodied in the heroic actions of a select individual or group. This article proposes that despite indications of a move from ideology to profit, the Chinese media returns to such 'hero narratives' in emergencies as a deliberate and considered means of operationalising existing frameworks for the control of mass audiences.

Introduction

Each year China's mighty Yangzi and Yellow Rivers spill over due to a combination of melting snows, seasonal rainfalls and poor land management techniques, a lasting remnant of past attempts to boost agricultural production at any cost.[1] With an equal regularity, China's state-run television system, the 16-channel China Central Television (CCTV), reports on the floods using narrative techniques reminiscent of the worst excesses of the Mao propaganda years. In this narrative the floods take on epic proportions as the masses attempt to contain the water in a giant collectivist push. Individuals are selected as model citizens, but they humbly resist being labelled heroes – ultimately their actions are for the good of the nation. This article explores the factors behind the construction of such a fixed narrative of news reporting on matters of national crisis. It argues that although

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media technologies may have changed rapidly in mainland China – a 'society in transition' – the ways of imparting messages to the public continue to rely on storytelling structures and moral tales with a long history in Chinese culture, but most successfully utilised during the Mao years.

The need for effective communication to a large, often illiterate (for many in rural areas) population was vital to Mao and his push during the Communist Revolution. As Robert Bishop (1989, 172) points out, in the news media's role as the 'mouthpiece' or, *houshe* (literally, 'throat and tongue') for government propaganda:

> The Maoist system was a hierarchical one that worked best in emergencies, mobilizing against real or supposed threats from foreign devils or class enemies. It was built on an essentially emotional appeal, with only a veneer of rational analysis.

In China's case, the need to continue beyond the Mao years with such a strong nationalist discourse when reporting on crisis events rests, in part, on temporal structures determined by political necessity. Borrowing from a sociological trajectory that argues that 'ideational production is not historically accidental' but situated in specific social and political contexts (Zhang 2000, 618) this article examines Chinese media coverage of three major events, namely the Yangzi River floods of 1998, the 'Spy-Plane Incident' of 2001 and the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003. The historical context of these events places them around the time that many argued that China's masses needed a distraction from the major upheaval of the country, and the inherent social and economic divisions between rural and urban Chinese rose to the extent that 'society again needed a common enemy – an image of the other – to bear China's agony during its historic transformation' (Dai 2001, 183). This 'distraction' needed to be of something near epic proportions and, as Dai Jinhua (Ibid, 184) argues, '[n]ationalism, without a doubt, became one of the only legitimate banners that could be summoned to remobilize the Chinese people'. Other theorists follow a similar line, with Gregory Lee (2003, 60) proposing that 'State authorities are, indeed, desperate to maintain ideological domination, but once again the only ideology left available to them is nationalism, an ideology they attempt to nurture and exploit by appeals to patriotic sentimentality and its associated practices'. This return to familiar ideological territory is far more than a benign attempt at creating a nostalgic view of a more 'traditional' China; it is a deliberate and considered means of operationalising existing frameworks for the control of mass audiences.

For most media producers in China, under the watchful eye of the regulating body the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), the only available option for articulation of this ideology is through the construction

(or re-construction) of the audience as 'the masses'. Zhang Yong (2000, 621) notes that the plural conceptions of 'the masses' in Maoist discourse refer to:

> [T]he meaning of a positive or potentially positive social force... [and] the image of mobs who are ignorant, inferior, unstable and therefore in need of enlightenment. Both are clearly identifiable in the Party's policies and strategies to educate and mobilize the masses and to rely on the masses to increase the Party's power.

Such a notion reinforces long-held views of the passivity of Chinese audiences. But this passivity should not be viewed as representative of an ignorant audience. James Lull (1991, 84) and others (Sun 2002; Chang 2003; Winfield et al. 2005) note the discerning nature of the Chinese audience where, '[f]or the most part, news is not meant to be objective and the people do not labor under any belief that it tries to be'.

The stress on the hegemony of the players in media production and consumption tends to suggest that the Maoist ideology is still strictly adhered to by China's media. Despite this adherence, a number of analysts (including Zhang Yong) argue that the media in China have recently undergone a move from a focus on ideology to a focus on profit, and a corresponding shift from production for the masses to a more discerning audience. However, there have been few empirically grounded studies that have concentrated on the content of news programs. This article seeks to address such an analytical void and challenge the idea that changes to media production in response to audience demand results in widespread ideational change in the reporting of major news events.

Zhang (2000, 624) contends that ideational change occurred nearly 20 years ago when, with the emergence of television commercials, those involved in television production underwent a 'major shift in both conceptual and practice spheres'. Furthermore, Zhang (Ibid, 629) claims that the audience is now media savvy, and that China's media managers constantly discuss the 'heterogeneity and fluidity of the audience'. Correspondingly, media management techniques have incorporated a shift in the 'basis for designing and evaluating media content', moving from perfunctorily following dictatorial Party policies to satisfying 'audience needs and satisfactions' (Ibid, 631). An even more reductive view is put forward by Xiaoying Wang (2003, 151) who claims that there is 'nothing in official ideology that can form a remotely plausible connection between the lingering old life/world of "communism" and the brave new life/world of capitalism' and that there is 'no constituency in post-Mao, now post-Deng, China that is responsive to both elements of official ideology'. Wang's argument falls well short of convincing when she declares that '[a]s official ideology has in large part abandoned its Maoist legacy of class and class struggle in favor of the productivist and consumerist values

compatible with the new market economy, a major transformation has taken place in the identities of heroes and heroines in literary and cinematic texts produced by the state ideological apparatuses' (Ibid, 133). However, the deployment of these heroes and heroines from, if not literary and cinematic, then certainly folkloric texts, seems to suggest that no major 'transformation' has taken place, but rather that mass audiences rely on traditional narratives.

Others argue that Maoist doctrines have been replaced by slick, consumerist reproductions of nationalistic ideologies. For instance, Gregory B. Lee (2003, 55) uses Chinese MTV to argue the extent to which 'the potentially subversive redeployment of Maoist and Nationalist iconography has now been successfully reined in to be displaced by a sophisticated reproduction of nationalist ideology resituated in the new consumerism of emerging middle-class urban China'.

By examining the media coverage of three tragic events in China's recent history, we can see how perceived ideological shifts have not been as dramatic as many commentators claim, but that in each instance there has been a swift return to the comfort of Party structured narratives, or, what I term the hero narrative.

Narrative

> Narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narratives. (Barthes, 1977)

Tzvetan Todorov once claimed that 'narrative begins with a state of equilibrium or social harmony' that is 'disrupted, usually by the action of a villain' causing a moment of disequilibrium (in Fiske 1987, 138). A final resolution occurs, resulting in 'another, preferably enhanced or more stable, state of equilibrium' (Ibid, 138-9). Todorov's model of narrative structure suggests a hegemonic structure that 'emphasizes the social *over* the individual' (emphasis added).

A similar tripartite structure is visible in Roland Barthes' suggestion of a hermeneutic code, differing from Todorov's at the micro, rather than the macro level. Barthes constructs his narrative through a) a question or enigma, b) the 'presence of an absence' – or a teasing, elusive moment that maintains the interest/desire of the audience, and c) a resolution and/or answer to the initial question (Lewis 1991, 126).

But while both Todorov and Barthes set out to determine the essentiality of the three-act structure for the operation of the narrative form, their work is perhaps best suited to literary and cinematic forms. News narratives appear to operate in a more complex manner.

The News Narrative

Lewis (1991, 131) maintains that news abandons (traditional) narrative and, regardless of the medium, inverts Barthes' hermeneutic code by offering the resolution from the outset – 'like being told the punchline before the joke'. Lewis (Ibid) claims that:

> [W]e do not have our interest awakened by an enigma and gratified by a resolution. The scenes that compose the news narrative appear in an almost arbitrary succession. It is a structure that bears more resemblance to a shopping list than a story.

Lewis (Ibid, 151) points out that 'within the news narrative, the most powerful moment seems to involve the event, or action sequence.' While I am primarily concerned with the production and content of various news reports in crisis situations, I do not portend to make assumptions about the actual reception of the texts in China. Lull (1991) and Lewis (1991) both question the effectiveness of news narratives based on their own audience-centred research. However, my claim is that despite this 'evidence' news producers - those creating the programs - continue to use such structures. After all, it is the sense-making possibilities of news narratives that provide news producers with their strongest arsenal. As Chang (2003, 120) suggests, '[t]he news as narrative is a story-telling mechanism with specific properties'. News stories operate as 'narratives that transform the real to the mediated' (Ibid, 121), and it is within this mediated form that the narrative of the hero is most able to flourish.

The Hero Narrative

Definitions of the hero are many and varied, with Raglan (1937) famously drawing on studies of mythical literary/folkloric heroes to create a twenty-two step rating to determine the status of the hero, and others (Rank, Campbell) drawing on sociological and psychological studies in their search to uncover the meaning of a hero. But while much discussion draws on concepts of the hero as a leader, an active warrior, a *Braveheart*, there is also the inexperienced, accidental hero who ventures perilously close to martyrdom. Sidney Hook (1945/1992, 4) argues that 'the history of every nation is represented to its youth in terms of the exploits of great individuals – mythical or real.' However, the fragile nature of such myth-making is exposed when we consider that our belief in the hero is a 'synthetic

product', subject to the whim of '[w]hoever controls the microphones and printing presses' (Ibid, 5).

Hook (1992, 175) also notes that 'many of the men and women whom we venerate as heroes are not great historical figures. We may admire them for the risks taken beyond the call of duty, their quiet sacrifice, their fortitude in adversity'. The recognisable cultural framework of the narrative assures us that the hero will always intercede at the moment of disequilibrium. Furthermore, Hook states that '[n]ot to believe in heroism of this kind […] is a sign of great dullness or obtuseness', and that these heroes operate as 'models of personal ethical conduct' (Ibid, 176).

Perpetuating the Nationalist Discourse

For the purposes of this study I draw from three brief episodes to illustrate how particular texts operate within a broader narrative structure. While the first two cases are from CCTV news broadcasts, the samples are from mediated sources (due to availability), but are nevertheless indicative of news reports that I watched night after night in successive stays in China from 1995 – 2000.

Case 1: The Floods

The television documentary *China: Revenge of the River Gods - 1998 Yangzi River Floods* (2001) offers Western viewers a telling insight into the images screened in the Chinese media. This collaborative production of Southern Star TV, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), and CCTV features 'rare footage not seen previously outside China' (ABC 'Program Sales') of Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers battling the rising tide of the Yangzi River. Stirring images of bravery and heroic actions show the collective fight of the soldiers, invoking past images of Mao's masses. A sense of order amongst chaos is shown in the desperate exhortations of one soldier screaming into a megaphone:

> "Faster Comrades! We're saviours battling the flood! We're fighting on the frontline, united as one strong team!"

Extreme close-ups of individual faces, straining under the force of the crushing flow of water, add to the urgency. Once the breach is plugged and an aerial sweep of the site shows hundreds of vibrant red Chinese national flags fluttering over the repair, the English voiceover quotes Chinese news reports proclaiming:

> Tens of thousands of heroic Chinese soldiers have devoted their energy and lives to build a new wall. They have shown the spirit of the Chinese People's

> Liberation Army to the world. They are the people's army and they will always appear whenever they are needed. They're the heroes of the nation.

The mythic narrative is in operation here, resulting in an instance where 'the hero thus has excessive meaning, extraordinary semiotic power, and acts as a mediator between the opposing concepts' (Fiske 1987, 133) – in this case the 'evil' disequilibrium of the threatening river and the 'good' resolution of its containment.

The entire narrative of this report has a strong precedent in the Beijing Opera *Song of the Dragon River* that 'shows how the Long Jiang Brigade chose to sacrifice its own land in order to divert a flood, thus eventually saving many more acres in the larger collectivity' (Chu et al. 1979, 407). The narrative is one of overcoming nature by sheer manpower (few women are included in the battle and despite Mao's widely cited claim that 'Women hold up half the sky' their numbers are less apparent in the public face of today's PLA). In other words, the overriding function of this narrative is to show how the collective - the masses - can overcome adversity.

But why does such a narrative structure appear to work so effectively? Firstly, the nationalistic functions of the Chinese media are governed by both official and non-official decrees. Officially, the SARFT, under the State Council, ensures that 'the Chinese are not seeing programs that offend Chinese sensibilities or challenge the CCP's worldview' (China Online, 2000). In an unofficial capacity, leaders such as former president Jiang Zemin ensure that the nationalistic discourse continues by issuing statements urging broadcasters to issue guidelines about making their products 'more Chinese' (Mufson 1996 cited in Lee 2000, 219). As with many government policies these are deliberately vague or ambiguous claims, but nevertheless serve as a warning to media producers to not stray too far from Party ideologies.

But the use of mass media to perpetuate a nationalist discourse is not unique to China, as Dayan and Katz (1992, 22) illustrate:

> The rhetoric of media events contrasts – as does journalism, generally – with academic rhetoric in its emphasis on great individuals and apocalyptic events. Where social science sees long-run deterministic processes, journalism prefers heroes or villains.

In China's case also, the use of dramatic events serve not only to capture the interest of viewers but also to further the nationalistic cause of the CCP. While Dayan and Katz base their views on a more market-oriented desire to capture the

interests of audiences, in China any notions of 'marketing' a catastrophic event must remain subservient to the need to contribute to the processes of nationalism. Therefore, although many see the framing of news stories as episodic rather than thematic (see Johnson-Cartee 2005, Iyengar 1991), the Chinese news media make concerted efforts to link the episodic with the thematic.

A second reason for the effectiveness of such narratives can be found in the earlier argument that China's media has not undergone as radical a transformation as many suggest. Certainly, some areas of China's electronic media have undergone a series of radical changes since television was introduced in the late 1950s. For many Chinese peasants in these early years of socialist reconstruction, 'the experience of fairly direct communication from the seat of power [was] new and exciting' (Houn 1961, 2). Writing during this period, Houn (Ibid) notes that the peasant was 'less likely, at first, to be resentful of the attack upon his mind or to offer passive resistance than … his jaded brethren in more highly technological civilizations'.[2] This can be explained to an extent through a technologically deterministic frame where the groundwork had been set by the use of radio and wired broadcasts to spread nationalistic slogans, later appropriated by Mao to spread his 'thoughts'.

Further complicating the idea that such narratives simply operate on traditional frameworks is Houn's claim that 'the creation of new mass audiences which is a condition of modern propaganda is almost entirely a phenomenon of the recent past' (Ibid). Here, the argument is centred more on the medium than the message, (to borrow from Marshall McLuhan) although it is noted that until the time of mass electronic broadcasting in China, indoctrination was 'sufficient to ensure conformity' (Ibid, 3). This conformity was necessary to fulfil the daunting task facing the CCP in controlling such a large and potentially unwieldy population. The idea of conformity offered the nation a chance at stability unparalleled in China's long and turbulent history. In reference to the pre-television days, Houn (Ibid, 168) argues that stability was partly achieved through the sleight of hand where 'cultural, musical, and dramatic programs [were] weighted with political content' and that the reduced allocation of time to news and political broadcasts did not diminish radio's properties as a 'propaganda and indoctrination media'.

The transition to television proved somewhat more challenging for the CCP to the point that during the Cultural Revolution 'television stopped entirely ... broadcasters were dismissed; equipment was not maintained; and policies were confused or absent' (Howkins 1982, 28). In the latter years of the Cultural Revolution television production slowly resumed, although 'the staple fare ... consisted of the news [18 out of 26 minutes were "rolling captions of Mao's thoughts"]… and the five Beijing operas approved by Jiang Qing [Mao's wife]' (Ibid, 28). One of these operas was the aforementioned *Song of the Dragon River*

(Long Jiang Song). But while crises such as floods offer a way of making nationalistic heroes from the masses, in China's demonstrably collectivist society the actions or sacrifices of an individual can similarly be turned into a lesson in nationalism. Bishop (1989, 173) contends that the deification of Mao was instrumental in the rise of the Communist Party, and that:

> Every experienced propagandist, whether evangelist or advertiser, attempts to personify good and evil. Abstractions are almost impossible to sell to the masses. Personal heroes who save us from personal villains are much easier to understand.

But while the floods highlighted the collective strengths of the masses, a later incident was to more effectively utilise the trope of the 'personal hero'.

Case 2: The Spy plane

The hero as individual is exemplified by the use of the hero's family in news reports, with the hero's spouse often filmed in their hospital bed (distraught with worry, they collapse and are required to spend some time in confinement surrounded by family – as opposed to rigid Anglophile cultures where one suffers/grieves in silence and in private). This particular narrative can be illustrated by the 2001 'Spy-Plane Incident' in which a US spy-plane was brought down over China's Hainan Island by two Chinese fighter planes, one of which subsequently disappeared, along with its pilot, Wang Wei. Original CCTV footage rebroadcast in the documentary *Dangerous Straits* (2001) shows Ruan Guoqin, the wife of the still-missing Wang Wei in bed, sobbing her devotion with, what we assume to be her mother by her side. The English subtitle reads "Mrs Wang Wei: Pilot's wife" (married women in China do not take their husband's name in marriage). Ruan begins to speak: 'My husband's plane was hit, he jumped out with a parachute [pause] and has been missing for 78 hours [pause – zoom in for close up of the grieving woman's face as she begins to sob]. I can't eat or sleep [further sobbing] I'm really worried about him'. As Dai Jinhua (2001, 184) argues, in the late 1990s 'The representation of kinship family and the social discourse of sharing suffering once again used the name of the nation to seek the devoted sacrifice and fervent patriotism of the lower levels of society'. Ruan's awareness of the TV camera seems to be somewhat stage-managed to heighten the appearance of her grief. From this author's Western perspective, one cannot but help feel that she is dutifully fulfilling her ideological role as grieving spouse both in terms of the cultural and familial obligations (to be seen to be grieving) and her political obligations (Ruan glances at the camera several times as if to verify that she is performing the correct grieving functions).

This public grieving has a critical role to play in times of national crisis. In linking the grief of the individual to the collective, the media can further gain sympathy for the victim(s) as well as enlist the widespread support of the masses. This reflects Zhang's (2000, 626) view that 'at moments of heightened political tension (e.g. the political storm in 1989, Hong Kong's handover in 1997, the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in May 1999 and the crackdown on Falungong) … the concept of the 'masses' becomes more salient in determining the kinds of media practice to be adopted'.

The Spy-Plane incident uses the narrative of Good (China) versus Evil (the US); a narrative that draws from Levi-Strauss' concept of the mythic narrative bound by the 'logic of the concrete' in which an immovable, culturally-determined binary structure operates (see Fiske 1987, 129-30). Its function is to reinforce China as morally superior, both through its demands for an apology from the US and its deifying of the 'innocent' pilot. Just days following the incident, the *Beijing Review* published a passionate letter from Ruan Guoqin to US President Bush, again making the individual act into a public declaration. This is not to say that Western media do not use similar narrative techniques – the point I wish to illustrate is that China has not dispensed with such overt displays of nationalism in its rush to promote a more market-oriented media. In fact, as Zhang (2000, 633) concludes, there is a need to balance the power between the two contending ideologies of 'satisfying the audience' and 'approaching the masses' which are at the mercy of what he calls 'momentary swings of political atmosphere'.

This juggling of the balance of power also helps to explain why there is a need to create heroes and villains. Firstly, this is a survival technique for the government. It offers the opportunity for a distraction from everyday problems – in China's case this includes key issues such as poverty, rapidly escalating unemployment and overcrowding of urban areas, and corruption at various levels of the provincial and state hierarchies. Secondly, this serves to depoliticize the event by creating a solvable situation that the people, the masses, can all fix – any apportioning of blame to the Central government or the Party is seen as secondary to the might and power of the people. The key, therefore, is to turn a negative situation into a positive outcome using a predetermined 'narrative of values'. Thirdly, as Fiske (1987, 129) points out 'Narrative structure demonstrates that people and places are not anarchic and random, but sensible [combining] the paradigmatic sense of places and people with the syntagmatic sense of events and time into a grand signifying pattern'. In other words, the binary structure of hero: villain, or, good: evil, allows the audience to make sense of the issue.

This sense-making, we can argue, was visible in Mao's ability to use storytelling to 'convert weakness into strength' and to conclude all his stories 'with a happy (that is, a moral) outcome' (Apter, 1993, 267-269). David Apter (drawing from Hayden

White) explores Mao Zedong's construction of storytelling as a form of political discourse, stating that '[f]or each set of enemies outside the party – the Nationalists, the Japanese – and demons within… there are stories, specific narratives, which come together'(Ibid, 268-9).

Exemplifying this 'story-telling' element in the hero narrative is the picking out of an individual soldier as a 'model soldier'. In China's case this has been most successfully used in the image of Lei Feng, the 'quasi-mythical model of the perfect communist man … who spent his days overachieving and his nights reading Mao thought' (Willey et al. 1987 in Schnell 1999, 45). Lei Feng was known to desire nothing more than to be 'a revolutionary screw that never rusts' and is arguably part of the collective schema of all Chinese citizens. A 'model worker', he was reportedly killed in 1962 by a falling telephone pole while working tirelessly for the good of the people, and since that time has been revered by the Chinese people.[3] In the Spy Plane Incident, the *People's Daily* (15 April 2001) reports that 'it was the people's army that trained Wang Wei to be useful for the country' and quotes the missing pilot's parents "He was our son, and son of the Party and the people, too." Such a comment reiterates the notions of both filial piety and unswerving devotion to the state.[4]

Two days later, the *People's Daily* (17 April 2001) exhorted that China's youth should 'learn from Wang Wei's high political consciousness of daring to die to safeguard the national sovereignty and dignity, his spirit of dedication to safeguard the interest of the motherland and the Chinese people, and his military struggle against a powerful enemy'. This call is suggestive of the historically determined ideational production, and reflects Hook's (1945/1992) proclamation that 'the exploits of great individuals' serve as instructive markers of nationalism for the young.

Case 3: The Pandemic

A third and final example of using such narratives is found in the 2003 outbreak of a potential pandemic of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The press coverage of the SARS outbreak in China was illuminating, to say the least. The *People's Daily* (25 April 2003) published an anonymous heartfelt piece entitled *My Doctor Wife Put Her Life on the Line to Fight SARS*. This article outlines how a heartbroken husband pleads via telephone with his wife to return home from her hospital. 'Do you want me to be a deserter when the battle is raging on' is her stoic reply. The media ran with such stories, naming the quarantined medical staff the 'Bethunes' after Norman Bethune, the Canadian surgeon famous for joining Mao's Communists in Yenan and losing his life after contracting septicemia in the battle against invading Japanese forces (Landsberger 2003).

The collective fight was further promoted by this and boundless other articles throughout China's press and electronic media sources. The *People's Daily* (30 April 2003) featured an article stating:

> Under the staunch leadership of the Central Committee of the Communist Part of China with Comrade Hu Jintao as the General Secretary, the whole nation, united as one man in the fight against atypical pneumonia, has struck up a heroic song featuring the Chinese people's strong will, solidarity, dedication, scientific and realistic attitude and determination to overcome difficulties and win victories.

The concept of unquestioning devotion to one's leaders is paramount in this instance. China's leaders were desperate to regain public support after it was revealed that health authorities had been tracking the spread of SARS since November 2002 (Ho et al. 2004, 30).

In an article on 'value themes' in Chinese short stories of the immediate post-Cultural Revolution period in the mid 1970s, Ai-li Chin (in Chu et al. 1979, 297-301) proposes that there are a number of themes and types of heroes and heroines that represented 'another turn in ideological emphasis' but still relied upon 'similar characteristics found in stories of the early 1960s and …1970s'. The three major types she outlines are: the 'need of young workers and cadres for training and guidance by experienced elders', 'dedication to work, including overcoming physical limitations" and "political conflict or intrigue at the local level'. Chin points to a fixed set of values that undermine stories of the time: ideological correctness, willingness to work hard, activism, honesty, trustworthiness and sincerity, speaking out, affection and caring for others and, finally, 'implicit values' concerning family unity versus sexual equality and youth versus age (Ibid, 301-3). It is these themes that regularly appear throughout the Chinese media, often repackaged and contemporised, but retaining their core ideological elements.

The SARS outbreak provided an opportunity to use the narrative of the masses controlling nature. However, the function of the narrative had some notable differences. Firstly it was to show that China's ability to respond to such a crisis was on a par with any other nation. Secondly, that China's medical facilities were world class, and operated within a transparent system of government. In a rather odd twist, the government made overt links to the precedent of the 1998 floods, and even linked this battle to the reasons behind Labour Day. But the overt message was one of face-saving, both at the national and international levels in a type of 'semiotic over-determination' (to use Wanning Sun's term, 2002) whereby the media perhaps felt it necessary to overcompensate for the embarrassment of the Party's leaders after they had been publicly exposed as hiding the 'true' figures on SARS cases.

But while these universalistic qualities or cultural values may not have changed, I must concede that many things are in the process of changing in China's TV news coverage. These changes are not so much at the ideological level as at the intersecting level of culture and technology. An example of this occurred following the events of September 11, 2001, when many Chinese crowded hotel lobbies in order to get live coverage of the disaster from international cable networks. As a result of frustrations expressed by many, changes were made in the form of the immediacy of the coverage, including live-to-air reporting, in the coverage of the invasion of Iraq by US and coalition forces. Relying on faster technologies to get broadcasts on air, there is however still much to suggest a tight control on news reporting and little to suggest moving beyond Party-approved ideological lines. As Chua Chin Hon (2003) notes, 'the Chinese media and its columnists [chose to] adopt an anti-war rather than an anti-US stance' and still gave the impression of 'speaking as one with the Chinese government because "old habits die hard" '. As James Lull wrote in 1991:

> the Communist Party still ultimately determines what the people will learn through the public channels. This iron fist control is less apparent when things are going well for the government. But when China faces a crisis, reactionary forces once again assert their power (85).

It would appear that indeed, 'old habits, die hard'. The SARS episode resulted in a situation where Betty Houchin Winfield et. al. (somewhat generously) concede the Chinese public suffered a 'disconnectedness from vital functional information', but that this disconnectedness 'may eventually cause social grievances, and a distrust of the government as well as the media' (2005, 268). In the march toward a more transparent society (rhetorically, at least), China's news producers will increasingly be faced with the need to create narratives that satisfy audience desires for information while continuing to peddle Party ideologies.

Conclusion

The chosen examples of the 1998 floods, the Spy Plane Incident and the reporting on SARS indicate that China's journalists narrate news stories in such a way that the 'end result constitutes a mode of knowing that allows the public to make sense of the world' (Chang 2003, 121). According to Pan and Lu (in C.C. Lee, 2003, 230) 'professionalism as an ideology is truncated and fragmented in China's journalism. It does not operate as an apolitical system in which media serve the whole society and the journalistic profession controls its work'. In other words, there is little scope for China's media professionals to move beyond fixed narrative structures that replicate Party ideologies.

While it has been seen that traditional narrative structures are dislodged in the presentation of news stories, the mythic qualities of China's heroes continue to operate in providing resolution to each instance of disequilibrium. The employment of narratives based on Maoist ideologies that address the masses are not something that will fast disappear from the Chinese media. Firmly based on collectivist beliefs and an entrenched desire for nationalism to remain a key element in China's transition from a developing society to a developed society, China's leaders seek to legitimise the unity of the nation through a sense of coming together in times of crisis, drawing from traditional Chinese 'values' of devotion, piety and face-saving. Although not strictly unique to China, this technique is one that appears to have greater currency in a nation where successive generations have placed their trust and loyalty in the communications emanating from the government-controlled media.

Notes

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[1] In the interests of brevity, my references to 'China' and the 'Chinese media' refer to the mainland of the People's Republic of China, rather than outlying territories. I accept full responsibility for the reductive nature of this terminology.

[2] Houn (1961, 3) also claims (furthering an argument strongly coloured with Orientalist rhetoric) that one of the central differences between China and the West is that 'indoctrination by governmental agency is not commonly held to be objectionable'.

[3] According to Stefan Landsberger (http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/lf.html), 'Some doubt exists as to whether Lei Feng ever really lived.'

[4] While the spirit of Lei Feng was used successfully following the Spy Plane incident, attempts to use his image in late 1989 (post-Tiananmen) failed on a grand scale (see Barmé 1999, 107).

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