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The plight of China's journalism education - From the perspective of the sociology of education

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Abstract. China's journalism education has been changing all the time to meet new demands brought by the political and economic reforms over the last two decades in the 21st century. However, the covert wars between ideology and practice, between classrooms and newsrooms have caused the "split personality" and general confusion among China's journalism educators and students. Several educational and practical problems thus arise as a result of the tug-of-war between economic and ideological demands. The problems of China's journalism education are not only from its complex social and economic environments, but also from its weight of history and culture. Although both journalism educators and some media organizations in China are making great effort to heighten awareness of problems and actively attempting to take remedial measures, the transition from the classroom to the newsroom is made more difficult by the complicatedness of the business operation of schools and media organizations, and the systematicity of journalism education remains problematic.

Keywords. journalism education, sociology of education, ideology, journalistic practice

Introduction:

China's journalism education has been changing all the time to meet new demands brought by the political and economic reforms over the last two decades in the 21st century. According to a 2013 report by China Association of Journalism & Communication Education, there are nearly 1080 schools with 0.23 million undergraduate students receiving journalism education in China, and predicting a need for 5,000 trained journalists per year in the 21st century. In the meanwhile, more and more journalism and media schools have been approved by the central government to set up graduate programs recruiting master and PhD candidates. Concomitant to the development, pursuit of in-depth education is often seen as a change to the educational curriculum and makes research an integral part of journalism education (Guo & Chen, 2017). Dramatic developments in journalism education seem to be occurring in China.

However, according to Han (2017), most of the news writings in China's are based on impressionistic observations and atheoretical in nature. From the field study of a newspaper, He suggests that the mass media developed a schizophrenic personality of being both a political organ and a profit-seeking enterprise. Tensions between these identities are reflected in the organizational culture, daily operations, and journalistic practice. Until today, journalism research and activities are mainly conducted within the narrow confines of the propaganda

model and development journalism. In this model, the major task of the mainstream media is to spread positive news and promote rapid economic development. Instead of engaging in the kind of watchdog reporting that challenges the social status quo, or that uncovers incompetence, corruption and malfeasance, the mass media sometimes wish to deflect the basic functions of journalism.

Under such circumstances, what journalism students learn in classrooms about news gathering and journalist ethics roughly corresponds with what media workers actually do in the newsrooms. The covert wars between ideology and practice, between classrooms and newsrooms have caused the “split personality” and general confusion among China’s journalism educators and students. In an era when investigative journalism has to give way to public relations and democracy has to yield to national security, by exploring the plight China’s journalism educators and students are facing, the researcher wishes to warn against complacency and possible inflation of the influence that China’s booming economy has on the development of the journalism industry and mass media.

According to Fang & Zhang (1995), the idea of journalism education was introduced from the West when China’s young intellectuals began to look toward the West for inspirations after pondering over China’s repeated defeats at the hands of foreign powers in the 19th century. They believed that in order to continue its glorious past, China had to borrow ideas from Western powers, the most important of which were “democracy and science”. Against such a backdrop, it was no surprise that China’s journalism education, which was started as part of the efforts to bring about “democracy and science”, began under the heavy influence of U.S. journalism education, as the U.S. was recognized by Chinese educators then as the most advanced country in journalism development and a ready source for journalism studies. With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and the beginning of a tense relationship between China and the U.S., there was a warm-up between China and the Soviet Union. The press system transformed itself to take on the “the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates (Siebert et al, 1963, p.1).” To accommodate the new system, journalism education had no choice but to abandon the American model and adopt the Soviet model.

The tug-of-war between market and ideology:

According to the works of Antonio Gramsci (1975) and his theory of ideological hegemony, media and journalists play a key role in producing consensus in our society — the underlying process by which hegemony is achieved. He suggests that media take their place alongside other cultural institutions such as schools, universities, trade unions, clubs and societies, in manufacturing consent. In such an ideology, the target of the journalism education in China has been changed to training of news writing personnel with solid political foundation. In another word, the official function of mainstream media in China is one of total advocate and celebrant of state policies, uncritically and unequivocally (Cai, 2003).

Although Chinese media have become less restricted as they have gained more revenue from independent sources via advertising since a market-oriented economic reform from 1978, journalists are under routine censorship. Xie & Chen (2006) has argued that to be compatible with economic reform, the CPC Central Committee, State Council and administrative department of education released many policies continuously to guide and regulate various problems and contradictions that may occur in the course of this transformation. They compiled statistics about the educational policies in documents, laws and regulations promulgated by the

Chinese government and administrative department of education since 1985, and found that in the 3 years of 1999, 2000 and 2001, when unified admission and enrollment expansion were underway, there were over 100 policies annually, much higher than other years. The conclusion is that the authority tried to ensure that the entire transformational process was under the control of institutional forces.

In China, the state and local governments own the majority of educational institutes in whole or in part, and they are closely monitored by the authorities. However, with the advent of market-oriented reforms, even state-owned schools must compete for students and sponsors. Yu Xu et al (2002) suggest that because political and economic environment can influence education in ways that may facilitate or impede its operation, educational strategies in schools need to be reflective of the social climate of the day. Media and journalism schools are increasingly under corrosive pressures from China's market, propelling them to reckon with the new environment. Although journalism education is showing signs of deviation from political norms, in the society, no social institutions, particularly those pegged into the web of superstructure, can obtain autonomy from ideological restrictions. Several educational problems thus arise as a result of the tug-of-war between economic and ideological demands.

Though the relationship between the market and the ideology tends to be cooperative and collusive, the influence of politics on education is dominating. According to Zhang Ye (2009), the ideology refers to the pole towards political forces, and means specific concepts, outlines, frameworks and the sum of constantly regenerating practices of journalism education provided by those concepts, outlines, and frameworks. From this perspective, there is a reason for the fact that higher education is considered "the last piece of fortress" in China's economic and cultural development. It is supposed that, once the college education for journalism students is complete, the graduate will help "to serve society by informing the public, scrutinizing the way power is exercised, stimulating democratic debate, and in those ways aiding political, economic, social and cultural development (UNESCO, 2007)".

But does the reality match the high expectation of the UNESCO? Can market economy become the Saviour to China's journalism education? McChesney (2003) makes such statements:

*Commercialism also fostered corruption, as newspapers turned to sensationalism and outright lying to generate sales. Leading reformers in the U.S., like Robert La Follette of Wisconsin, argues that the commercial press is destroying democracy in its rabid service to the wealthy. As Henry Adams puts it, "The press is the hired agent of a monied system, set up for no other reason than to tell lies where the interests are concerned." In 1919, Upton Sinclair published his opus in the US, *The Brass Check*, which provided the first great systematic critique of the limitations of capitalist journalism for a democratic society. (McChesney, 2003, p.301)*

The results, as McChesney (2003) suggests, will be for schools of journalism to respond to this reality, and chairs in business journalism and public relations to mushroom across journalism college campuses.

The status quo of China's journalism education:

In recent years, faced with the increasingly deteriorating environment problems as well as social conflicts generated by the widening gap between the rich and poor, Chinese authorities want to tighten its control over press and introduce the training system that requires journalists to train in Marxist and Communist theories of news. The educational policies have reflected

such a tendency. A typical journalism course description reads: “All students are required to have a solid understanding of Marxist principles and theories related to news media; to be very familiar with the Party and state’s policies on news and information dissemination; and to be able to analyze various social phenomena from a Marxist viewpoints and using Marxist method (Fudan University, 2020)”.

Zhang et al (2008) argue that the political part of the course design and curriculum forms the core of official ideology in journalism education and it is unchallengeable and non-negotiable in China. In daily operations, as Herbert (2001) points out, Chinese media are required to improve the image of the state. The seemingly irreconcilable discrepancies between ideology and action and between classroom study and newsroom practice are a major source of frustration in China’s journalism education. Deuze (2006) argues that Platonic ideas of either the profession of journalism or the “nature” of the university obscure the more complex and continuous character of the relationship between thinking and doing, reflection and action, theory and practice; and these binary oppositions function extremely well to dig fictitious trenches to separate the social systems of journalism and the academe. These “binary oppositions” may seem to be a universal presence, perhaps nowhere in the world is the existence and persistence of such a conflict more obvious than in China. In journalism schools, students are mainly required to memorize all manner of jargon and quotes from mountains of books and journals by communications theorists. The top students are selected on the basis of their memorization skills rather than their critical, independent and in-depth writing and reporting.

On the one hand, educational policies dictate the dominance of Marxist ideology and the emphasis of persuasive propaganda in curriculum design and classroom instruction; On the other hand, increasing self-determination in management granted to educational institutions by the authorities prescribe a central role for market appeal and professionalism driven by quality education rather than faith (Repnikova, 2017). In He’s (2000) opinion, all ambiguities in Chinese political life are reducible to an ideological virtually defeated the purpose of ideology inculcation and encouraged an occasional amnesia about the somewhat “shady” past of the country’s journalism education. He (2000) also suggests that the space for improvisation in the classroom is vast, including discussions of the role of journalism as a watchdog, supervising power; as a voice of public need, accommodating the broad masses and their right to know; as a source of enlightenment and emancipation; and as a weapon for the weak, serving minority groups and the socially disadvantaged. This repertoire of views about news is refreshing to Chinese students, yet sabotaging and potentially dangerous because of its offensive nature in the eye of the authorities.

Under such circumstances, the basic task of developing a qualified curriculum has become an impossible mission for China’s journalism educators. Reasons for why certain content cannot be taught and certain methods of teaching are not permitted in Chinese journalism schools are obvious. Though the curricula at journalism schools across the country have tried to incorporate some audience appeal and western news values ranging from the five Ws in the lead to prioritizing conflict, relevance and consequences, curriculum revisions and modifications have not shown signs of changing direction of journalism education towards reduced political sensitivity. According to a survey of journalists’ capabilities in China by Yu Xu et al (2002), the ability of well-trained journalists to circumvent policy constraints and appeal to the demands of a competitive market is gaining preference. It is evident in those respondents’ complaint about the disconnection between classroom teaching and real-world needs. Some journalism educators are trying to introduce paradigms of “Guerrilla’s Strategies” (Tong, 2007) in conducting news reporting related to political issues in their teaching. Although

these pedagogies are no doubt innovative, they lack clear directionality and are not systematic on the whole to obtain fundamental breakthroughs.

Seib (2002) has argued that when the cost of innovation is far outweighed by potential benefits, or cannot be accommodated by the space designated by the system and the market, agents would often avoid or exclude innovative behaviors. On the one hand, journalism educators need to keep officially unacceptable ideas out of written documents and public discourse; On the other hand, as Cai (2003) points out, freedom of the press takes a back seat to the everyday work of getting rich or just getting on. Public's interest has been shifted toward the economy and the accumulation of material wealth. This attitude has a direct impact on the mass media, and a lot of Chinese young reporters have a greater interest in food and entertainment than politics. News media in China nowadays focus more on fashionable clothes and rich men's luxurious weddings than on the harsh realities of the socially disadvantaged.

Cai (2003) suggests that elective courses opened in journalism schools and departments have started to include courses which have more theoretical orientation and which are opened for students who are interested in theory learning, such as "Media Sociology", "Mass Media and Mass Culture"; and also include courses that pay more attention to practical operations like "Website Construction and Web Design". However, the curriculum of those course features more or less a little bit disorder and a lack of systematicity. According to a recent report, most China's journalism students aren't trained in the humanities or sciences; they are not prepared to report the complicated reality to meet the demand of an informed public. When breaking events occur, they do not know where to seek informed and authoritative sources. Although we have seen certain positive relationship between heightened awareness of problems and active attempts to take remedial measures, the systematicity of journalism education is still problematic

Yu Xu et al. carried out a survey in 2002 about the impact of China's political and economic environment on journalism education and it shows that 85 percent of the respondents feel that a true education reform is impossible under the current tight control and a labile market. Consistent with this expression, only 23 percent of the respondents consider journalism reform as essential given the timing and social context. This survey also suggests a common understanding that any substantive move towards reform such as elimination of propaganda content is doomed. This somehow reduces the perceived necessity for superficial changes. According to this survey, nearly all the respondents (90 percent) agree that current journalism course design fails to meet market needs. They conclude that it is obvious that faculty members are aware of market demands and the distance journalism education is kept from them. A main source of frustration for China's journalism educators is that they could do very little to change the status quo.

A university in which the researcher was working is now focusing on subjects in a tourist environment, and journalism is theoretically oriented toward cultural studies. Journalism is understood as a field of cultural work or as work for media culture. Such an approach moves the education of journalism much closer to public relations than any other interpretation of journalism. Hallin & Mancini (2004) suggest that when professionalism is based on training only and aims more to deliver knowledge for media and communication competency as a set of generic skills, we tend to omit the element of independence and critical thinking in decision making and put a premium on skills development in journalism education. What's more inappropriate is that some of the journalism schools are replacing the study of investigative journalism with a public relations curriculum.

No one can deny the fact that there is a safe haven where journalism faculties in China are able to teach relatively freely without fear or any tangible risk. Wilkins' theory about practical newsgathering skills being the core of journalism education has gained popularity in China's journalism schools. But what's more important is that reporters ought to have an ethical grounding in methods of reporting, evidence-gathering, and fact assessment. As Blom et al (2012) cites from Tom Jacobson: "Social complexity has multiplied dramatically. . . . It seems reasonable to expect that the liberal education traditionally expected of journalists must now go beyond the ability to write, beyond a skepticism towards given truth and beyond a sense of the drift of modern history." Hence, to be able to serve an important role in society, aspiring journalists should be taught critical-thinking skills in addition to practical skills to create comprehensive and intelligent news messages. Otherwise, those practical skills will be proven to be nothing more than skills of public relations or mere propaganda.

Zhang et al. (2008) suggest that China's journalism education remains in a condition of inadequately trained faculty, out-dated curricula, insufficient resources. The plight of China's journalism education is partly reflected in the shortage of publications of journalism research in university libraries, particularly western journalism-related books, references, journals and audio-visual materials. Cai (2003) suggest that the skills of news gathering, story structuring, interviewing, writing, copyediting, media history, law and ethics, and similar subject can be stressed everyday in the classroom. However, in all likelihood, a student may attend a morning class where she learns how to apply theories to news practice. In an afternoon session of the same day, she may be told how the content she learned in the morning is impracticable. To some extent, focused training in reporting and writing skills has replaced the position of journalistic practice as a watchdog in journalism education. The reporting and writing skills have given Chinese journalism students knowledge of the profession they would otherwise lack, but the realities of political life clearly restrict the extent to which the norms and ideas of journalism can be implemented.

Under such circumstances, it is predictable that China's colleges in journalism and mass communications are mass producing students who are unqualified for the demand of the journalism industry. One proof is that, Li Dongdong, deputy director of the General Administration of Press and Publication, told the *South China Morning Post* in 2010 that some mainland reporters were giving Chinese journalism a bad name because they were not properly trained. Although the editors and media decision makers suggest that students should be involved more in practical journalism, and journalism educators emphasize that field training is even more important than media theory, the difficult transition from the classroom to the newsroom is made more difficult by the complicatedness of the media business operation. In this situation, as Pan et al (2008) point out, the news reports are replaced by bulks of advertisement, and many of the news articles tend to be protocol news.

The emphasis on journalistic skills attributes partly to the large number of students selecting journalism studies, but only a small percentage of them are actually entering the traditional media after graduation. This has given rise to concerns that journalism education in fact opens the way to a "growing army of journalism-competent public relations specialists and freelancers who increasingly subordinate professional values to the requirement of commercial values and political persuasion" (Chamber, 2000, p.103). Another problem is the employment market all journalism students have to face after graduation. As a matter of fact, many media companies would even prefer to hire experienced journalists without a college degree. The reasons for such choices are quite clear: if the media company can employ those people who are capable of conducting basic reporting with less payment, there is no need for college graduates, who naturally request higher salaries. In addition, from the perspective of media

company managers, those journalists who hold a higher degree tend to be over-confident and thus are more difficult to work with. The reluctance of media companies to hire new graduate journalists has increased the anxiety of journalism college students and exacerbated the plight they are facing.

According to a 2013 report by China Association of Journalism & Communication Education, the total number of journalism and mass media undergraduate students amounted to about 230,000 in journalism programs in Chinese colleges. However, media organizations in China are recruiting less and less journalism students from those programs. According to Guo & Chen (2017), it is estimated that only one third journalism students can now find jobs in media organizations, while others have to find jobs in media-related companies like PR and advertising companies or even non-media companies. One of the reasons why Chinese media organizations have been recruiting less journalism students is that they want interdisciplinary students, namely non-journalistic students from such areas as computer, law, economics, arts and sports. This situation has made job competition more intensive than ever for journalism students. It also provides an appropriate explanation as to why explosive expansions of journalism education at China's colleges in the last two decades of the 21 century are generally frowned upon by the academic and the media industry.

The influences of current educational system of journalism:

The current plight of journalism education has an insidious effect on the mindset of both educators and students. Firstly, it discourages journalism students from asking challenging questions. It is commonly acknowledged that independent evaluations of newsworthiness are crucial to honest and effective journalism. Allowing news priorities to be dependent on policy priorities means surrendering intellectual autonomy (Seib, 2002). However, current educational system in China encourages a mindset that looks for the safe answers rather than troubling ones. Students are not necessarily praised for critical thinking if they could violate the school or local authorities, so it is considered best not to in most cases. Gradually, these future reporters learn to follow the system's direction toward development journalism on safe and uncritical topics. Secondly, it damages students' faith in their own opinions and judgments. Asking challenging questions or making criticizing comments might incur reprisal or punishment from the authorities, so it is best to keep quiet. Thirdly, some may blame the limited achievements of journalism education for comparatively short journalism history or lack of qualified educators and faculty. Under such an illusion, many journalism schools are introducing foreign journalism professors and experienced journalists into their teaching teams in order to improve teaching standard. However, most foreign journalism professors are quick to learn to avoid the controversial subjects that are at the heart of international media coverage in China. Under such circumstances, it is difficult for journalism educators to build up students' confidence in their own ideas, which will allow them to ask better questions, push against politically correct or safe answers, and eventually be better reporters.

It is undeniable that there are some qualified journalism students in China, but after graduation, many of them choose to abandon journalism career altogether. Xiao Xia (2020, personal communication), a journalism student at Yunnan University once said: "I am so confused, and I have so much mixed information. I don't know which path to follow. I am kind of relieved after I have decided not to be a journalist." It is totally understandable that most students prefer a well-paid job with career prospects to uncertainty after graduation. Even those who are capable of securing a job in the mass media and good at cooperating with the system find it difficult to achieve self-satisfaction in the media industry. Cai (2003) argues that in the mass media, official news items relating to the country's foreign affairs, political meetings and

stories relating to projects of government are placed in the front page. Most of the front-page news items were ready-made news items submitted directly by PR offices. As a result, many students who finish their internship in mainstream media argue that they did not do journalism work, but rather were propagators who received ready-made news items produced by the PR offices. In some directly government-owned news organizations, such as state and local TV stations, the situation is even more complicated. Students who are doing internship there argue that official news items are not interesting for the audience because they do not offer complete stories, and they limit the autonomy of reporters in gathering news. Cai (2003) has pointed out, reporters have to publish news related to government policies and political events, because they must be recorded as historical documents celebrating China's development in various areas. Students are quick to know the limitations of news reporting: what should be published and what should not, through their own experiences during the internship in news organizations. Even if students disagree or the values of the media are different from their own values and cultural background, they have to obey the rules in order to survive in China's journalism and mass media industries.

Conclusion:

Though the situation in the academic field of journalism education is still in a state of uncertainty due to national development and the reorganization of the academe in the country, it can be predicted that for a long time, China's journalism education programs will be more of a theoretical analysis of journalism and mass media than a preparation for real journalistic practice, although the educational faculties understand its mission as being more practical. The road towards ethical and professional journalism also remains blocked by journalism students' unemployment, low salaries, and a culture of political priority in the mass media.

The problems of China's journalism education are not only from its complex social and economic environments, but also from its weight of history and culture. In particular, as He (2000) has argued, the history of China's usage of media was formed within a rigid system, where the journalistic culture had meshed with the political culture. Under current educational system of journalism, any pedagogical modification is doomed to be superficial. Although both journalism educators and some media in China are making great effort to heighten awareness of problems and actively attempting to take remedial measures, the systematicity of journalism education remains problematic.

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