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Quality Journalism in China Is Not Dead; It's Just More Dispersed Than Ever

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This essay maps the evolving landscape of quality journalism in China, exploring where reliable information thrives under increasing restrictions. Analysing the roles of state-owned institutional media alongside diverse, independent voices—including professional content creators, citizen journalists, and those working transnationally—it demonstrates how these actors operate both within and beyond established media structures. The essay also discusses the challenges posed by platform dominance.

One full cycle of the Chinese zodiac has passed since the beginning of the Xi Jinping era, marking 12 years of significant transformation in the landscape of Chinese journalism. While some observers declared its demise several years ago, in this essay, I argue that despite the formidable challenges it faces, journalism in China remains remarkably resilient. It has adapted, evolved, lost some traditional strongholds, and found new life in alternative spaces. Using key events and prominent journalistic works from 2024 as examples, I will

explore the continuing vibrancy of Chinese journalism, identify its new locations, and analyse the complex challenges it confronts.

State-Owned Institutional Media: A Bulletproof Cage

In July 2024, *The Beijing News* (新京报) published a bombshell exposé revealing the unsanitary practice of cooking oil being transported in tankers previously used for industrial coal oil (Han 2024). This detailed report, which was promoted on the front page and extended to more than 5,000 words within the paper, meticulously traced a tanker from its delivery of chemical oil to its subsequent loading with cooking oil just three days later, without any intervening cleaning in the process. This revelation ignited public outrage on social media, evoking memories of the 2008 Sanlu milk scandal, which was brought to light by the now-defunct *Oriental Morning Post* (东方早报), a publication that ceased in 2017, with many of its staff transitioning to *The Paper* (澎湃新闻; see Fang and Repnikova 2022).

The publication of this investigation surprised many. *The Beijing News* was widely perceived as having lost its critical edge after its incorporation into the Beijing Municipal Propaganda Department and the imprisonment of its former publisher, Dai Zigeng (戴自更). This perception reflects a broader trend observed in the Xi era, in which the Chinese Communist Party press has been strengthened while commercial media outlets have been weakened. Scholarly works have documented this decline, noting the significant decrease in investigative reports published by outlets such as *Southern Metropolis Daily* (南方都市报), in which the number of investigative stories dropped from 169 in 2011 to just six in 2019, with the in-depth reporting page disappearing entirely in 2020 (Wang 2023: 77). Concurrently, commercial media has increasingly featured explicit and implicit propaganda promoting government achievements.

The cooking oil scandal, however, reveals the enduring potential for impactful investigative journalism within this seemingly restrictive framework. While President Xi has centralised power, the Chinese political system still requires a degree of media and

public oversight (Repnikova 2018). Investigations that focus on local issues or corporate malpractice, rather than directly challenging the central government, appear to be tolerated to a certain extent. This suggests that the space for critical reporting by state-owned institutional media, while narrowed, has not been eliminated.

The initial rumours surrounding the disappearance of Han Futao (韩福涛), the journalist who exposed the cooking oil scandal, proved to be false. His continued employment at *The Beijing News* as an investigative reporter underscores the protective function of institutional media, even as it constrains journalistic freedom. These state-owned outlets provide press credentials, facilitating access for sensitive interviews, and their official publication licences offer a degree of protection against reprisal. This ‘bulletproof cage’, as it were, offers journalists a platform for publishing investigative work, albeit within defined boundaries. Consequently, journalists seeking to pursue sensitive stories often choose to work within these institutions, accepting the limitations in exchange for the afforded protections. Other publications, such as *Caixin* (财新), *Sanlian Life Weekly* (三联生活周刊), *The Paper*, *Southern Reviews* (南风窗), and *Renwu* (人物)—all possessing official licences—similarly published notable works in 2024, demonstrating the continuing capacity for impactful journalism within this media sector.

Professional Content Creators (or *Zimeiti*): Fragile Yet Influential

The most shocking and impressive reporting in 2024 came not from a major newspaper or established magazine, but from a small independent team called *Positive Connections* (正面连接). Their 19,000-character report, ‘Stealing an 11-Year-Old Girl from Home’ (Hong 2024), focused on the tragic case of a young girl ensnared in a web of sexual exploitation and abuse. The five-month investigation revealed how the girl, isolated from family and peers, found solace in a group of similarly troubled youth—a ‘circle’ (圈子) that normalised risky behaviours, including substance abuse and sexual encounters. The story illustrates a

broader issue of child exploitation in digital spaces and raises critical questions about parental oversight, societal responsibility, and the urgent need for protective measures for at-risk youth.

Positive Connections, founded by veteran journalists from established publications such as *Southern Weekly* and *GQ China*, operates with the rigour of a professional newsroom. However, as a private company lacking the official licence for original reporting, it occupies a liminal space within the media landscape. This necessitates a strategic avoidance of overtly political topics and ‘hard news’, focusing instead on individual narratives and ‘softer’ issues. In the eyes of regulators, *Positive Connections* may be just one ‘self-media’ (自媒体 *zimeiti*) account among millions. However, for its creators, it represents a vital avenue for pursuing journalistic ideals. This delicate balance, while inherently unstable, allows the production of high-quality work that enriches the media landscape.

While the term *zimeiti* broadly encompasses content creators, both individual and institutional, lacking state-sanctioned media credentials (Fang 2022), this essay focuses on its specific application to journalists and journalistic teams leveraging social media platforms to publish their work. Before *Positive Connections*, this model of small independent teams producing impactful journalism had its precedent in figures such as Shou Ye (兽爷), a former *Southern Weekly* journalist whose team exposed safety lapses in children’s vaccines produced by Changchun Changsheng Biotechnology Company Limited in 2018 (Shou 2018). This investigation, widely circulated on social media, prompted high-level government intervention, resulting in arrests and official sanctions.

Beyond these small teams, the *zimeiti* landscape also encompasses solo creators who produce public interest journalism. For example, following *The Beijing News*’s cooking oil exposé, a Bilibili user known as ‘@高剑犁’ used publicly available data to track the implicated tanker’s movements, revealing its previous transport of not only coal oil but also animal feed (Gao 2024). This citizen-led investigation leveraged open-source intelligence and digital platforms. The creator documented the findings in a video that garnered more than 1 million views in 12 hours. It demonstrated the potential for individual creators to amplify and extend the impact of traditional media reports. Though later removed

from Bilibili, the video’s widespread republication on other platforms underscored its importance in further revealing the cooking oil scandal.

Another example is Xiang Dongliang (项栋梁), a former journalist at the Nanfang Media Group, who uses his WeChat public accounts *Constructive Opinions* (建设性意见) and *Basic Common Sense* (基本常识) to provide analysis of important public topics. Following a knife attack on a school bus carrying Japanese students in Suzhou, Xiang challenged the official narrative of it as an ‘isolated incident’, raising concerns about rising xenophobia (Xiang 2024a). His work extends beyond commentary to a form of performance art and soft activism reminiscent of civil society and internet culture in the 2000s. For instance, he once publicly ‘reported’ (举报) former *Global Times* editor Hu Xijin (胡锡进) for allegedly violating laws against using virtual private networks (VPNs) in China. In December 2024, he even rented a large advertising screen in one of the busiest Guangzhou metro stations to promote his views on traditional medicine, opposition to foreign invasions (alluding to the Russian invasion of Ukraine), and taxpayer rights (Xiang 2024b). While the advertisement was swiftly removed, Xiang’s actions highlight the potential for individual creators to challenge dominant narratives and spark public discourse.

Professional content creators who contribute to the journalistic landscape in China also include those not traditionally associated with journalism. Yixi (一席), a project hosting TED talk-style presentations, publishes in-depth discussions of critical social issues based on these speeches. For example, their talks have explored the impact of climate change on the elderly (Lu 2024) and the challenges faced by ageing migrant workers (Qiu 2023). These presentations, characterised by their sharp sense of urgency, depth, and human focus, contribute valuable perspectives to the public conversation.

In many ways, this diverse and dynamic landscape of professional content creators echoes the vibrancy of China’s commercial media in the late 1990s and 2000s. Driven by market forces and fuelled by innovation, these creators often push boundaries despite the ever-present threat of censorship and account suspension. As institutional media outlets, including commercial newspapers and magazines,

face increasing constraints, professional content creators offer new possibilities for critical reporting and public engagement.

Underground and Transnational Journalism: Brighter Sparks

While professional content creators such as *Positive Connections* navigate a precarious balance within China's digital sphere, a more clandestine network of individuals and small teams operates further underground, producing even more critical and politically sensitive content. These 'guerilla journalists' resemble the documentary filmmakers and independent writers Ian Johnson describes in his 2023 book *Sparks: China's Underground Historians and their Battle for the Future*. They carry on the legacy of publications such as *Spark*, an underground magazine produced by a group of young intellectuals, who challenged the official narrative and the top leadership during the Mao Zedong era. Johnson's work highlights the enduring struggle of memory against forgetting, and, in the current landscape, these 'sparks' of resistance burn brighter and more numerous than in the Mao era.

A stark example is the aftermath of the tragic Zhuhai car attack in November 2024, which claimed 35 lives and injured 43 people. While institutional media, including commercial outlets, constrained by censorship, offered limited coverage, citizen journalists stepped in to fill the void. The WeChat public account '图拉的精神食粮', authored by a professional journalist working independently, provided crucial firsthand accounts, including graphic descriptions of the scene and demographic details of the victims. This account, and others, such as '水瓶纪元' and '鸡蛋bot', which also published stories about the car attack based on on-site interviews and firsthand accounts, demonstrated the power of citizen journalism to circumvent official narratives and provide vital information to the public. The anonymity maintained by some of these authors, most of whom have professional backgrounds, underscores the risks inherent in such endeavours and highlights the courage and commitment required to pursue truth in a restrictive environment. It also suggests that those with profes-

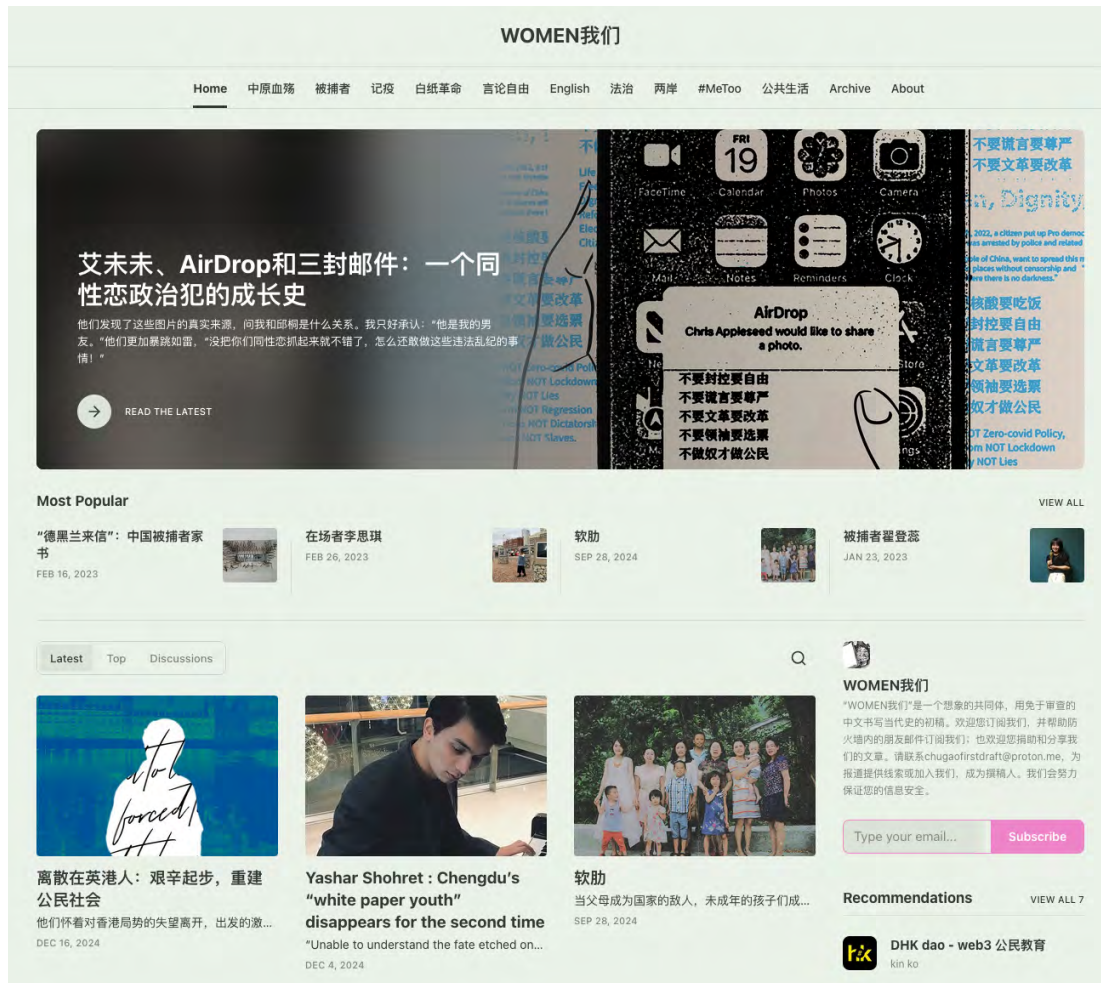
sional training are best equipped to navigate this challenging landscape, choosing to publish sensitive stories outside official channels.

This burgeoning underground journalistic activity extends beyond China's digital borders, supported by a growing network of transnational creators publishing on global platforms. The Great Translation Movement, for example, diligently translates Chinese texts into various languages, exposing events often obscured by the official narrative (Peng et al. 2024; see also Peng's critical essay in this issue). Youth-oriented Instagram accounts such as *Citizen Daily*, which was instrumental in amplifying voices during the A4 movement (Luo and Fang 2024), and Substack newsletters such as 'Women我们', which chronicles contemporary history in uncensored Chinese, further contribute to this transnational flow of information. For example, in 2024, *Women我们* featured stories on protestors arrested during Covid-zero demonstrations and the imprisoned Taiwanese publisher Fucha (富察), providing crucial context and visibility to these sensitive cases.

These diverse forms of underground and transnational journalism represent a vital counterpoint to the official narrative, offering alternative perspectives and amplifying marginalised voices. The resurgence of interest in investigative and in-depth reporting among young people, as observed by a journalism professor in mainland China with whom I recently spoke, suggests a promising future for this critical form of storytelling. Even as traditional media faces financial constraints and increasing restrictions, these aspiring journalists are finding new avenues to contribute to the public sphere, ensuring that the sparks of truth and resistance continue to ignite.

Beyond Political Pressure: The Platform Problem

While the dispersed nature of these emergent journalistic endeavours offers a degree of resilience against censorship, it also presents significant limitations. The impact of even the most compelling investigations can be blunted by the state's ability to control the narrative. The 2024 cooking oil scandal, for example, despite initial exposure by *The Beijing News* and subsequent citizen investigations, ultimately resulted



Screenshot from the Women 我们 Substack website.

in a perfunctory government report that effectively closed the case. Unlike the 2008 milk powder scandal, which spurred widespread public action and policy changes, the cooking oil incident demonstrates the diminished capacity of dispersed journalism to directly bring meaningful change in an increasingly restrictive environment.

Political pressure is not the only obstacle facing quality journalism in China. The dominance of digital platforms presents a unique set of challenges that impact all forms of journalism, from traditional news outlets to independent creators. While platforms play a significant role in information dissemination globally, their influence in China is amplified by their

absolute dominance of the information ecosystem and the lack of viable alternatives. News organisations largely reliant on platforms for distribution face several critical issues.

First, the ephemeral nature of platform-based publishing makes archiving and preserving journalistic work incredibly difficult. Articles published in social media feeds are easily lost, forgotten, or deleted, hindering efforts to maintain historical records and institutional memory. Second, platforms exert significant control over revenue models, effectively limiting news organisations to advertising-based income. Subscription models, which have proven successful in other countries, are largely unavailable in China due

to platform restrictions and the lack of independent websites or applications. This dependence on platform-controlled advertising severely constrains the financial sustainability of news organisations. Third, audience consumption habits are deeply entrenched within these platforms, making it difficult for content published outside the platform ecosystem to gain traction. Even when censored articles are reposted on alternative websites, newsletters, or global social media, they often fail to reach a wider audience within China due to the reluctance of the public to use other information channels.

This confluence of factors creates a concerning trend towards a bifurcated public sphere. A segment of the population actively seeks out quality information, using VPNs and other tools to access independent sources, while the majority remains passively reliant on platform-curated content, subject to algorithmic filtering and censorship. This growing divide poses a significant challenge for the future of journalism in China.

A State of Constant Flux

The media landscape in China is in constant flux, shaped by the interplay of tightening control, technological innovation, and the persistent pursuit of truth. While traditional media grapples with increasing constraints, a vibrant ecosystem of professional content creators, citizen journalists, and transnational reporters has emerged, offering alternative avenues for critical reporting and public engagement. Despite the challenges created by political control and platform dominance, the dedication and ingenuity of these diverse actors in China's media landscape offer a glimmer of hope. As the battle for truth continues to unfold in the digital realm, the ability of these dispersed networks to connect, collaborate, and innovate will be crucial in shaping the future of journalism in China. ■