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# The ideological decay and theoretical stagnation of Chinese journalism: A critique of the 'Marxist view of journalism' discourse

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### Abstract

The 'Marxist view of journalism' notion as the ruling Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rebranded media ideology has remained a trendy phrase and hot topic in China's official, media, and academic research discourse since the early 2000s. Despite its marked and prolonged public presence and significance for the understanding of the Chinese Party-state's media policy, a specific and systematic critique of the notion has remained absent in the literature.

Aiming to bridge this research gap, this study argues that being designed to attempt to theoretically justify the CCP's shift to retighten its control over China's increasingly market-oriented and self-minded media industry in the era of globalisation and digitisation, this high-profile 'new' notion is little more than a conveniently refurbished version of the very same old authoritarian press tradition of the Party, illustrating the ruling elite's lack of theoretical courage and capacity to engage in long-delayed yet much-needed media ideological innovation. The study also offers some general suggestions in relation to how the notion may be revisited and redeveloped.

### Introduction

The 'Marxist view of journalism' (*'makesi zhuyi xinwen guan'*) notion as the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rebranded media ideology was officially advanced in a circular issued by the Central Propaganda Department of the Party in October 2003, soon after the Hu Jintao-led, new CCP leadership was sworn in. At the centre of the circular's announcement of a new round of ideological-ethical education campaign across media organisations nationwide, was its call for Chinese journalists to equip themselves with, and firmly stick to, the 'Marxist view of journalism'. Without defining what the term exactly meant, the circular, however, made the 'Party principle' of journalism as its core value clearly. As the circular stated, 'applying Marxist view of journalism to guide journalistic work means [media organisations] must always insist in the Party principle of journalism and correctly guide public opinions' (Xinhua, 2003). Soon after this, the campaign was incorporated into a larger and high-profile 'Marxist Theory Research and Construction Project' launched by the CCP in March 2004 (Sina, 2004). In April of the same year, a work meeting on the project decided to set up 24 research groups across major social sciences disciplines and areas, including media and journalism and urged to get relevant research outcomes published in a timely manner (Wenming.cn, 2009). By then, the 'Marxist view of journalism' had effectively become the umbrella concept used to integrate and replace several similar existing terms and formulations (such as 'Marxist journalism', 'Marxist journalistic thought', 'Marxist journalism theory', 'socialist journalism', 'proletarian journalism', and 'Party press theory').

As a result of this development, by the late 2000s and the early 2010s, with the publication of a number of officially supervised and/or funded research projects, edited volumes, and textbooks and numerous academic and trade journal articles on the subject, China's Marxist media researchers had been able to declare the establishment of a Marxist view of journalistic theoretical system (e.g. Chen, 2006; 2010; 2011; Lin, 2005; Zheng, 2005; 2011; 2018; Zhu, 2010). In the meantime, the 'Marxist view of journalism' was also included in *Journalists' Training Textbook* (Liu & Jiang, 2013), the People's Republic of China's (PRC) first officially edited text for the nationwide journalistic continuing education program.

In the same year, about 25,000 journalists across the country were, for the first time, required to pass a professional test that included questions on the 'Marxist view of journalism' to be eligible to renew their press cards (People.cn, 2013). The most important recent development of this ongoing campaign was the publication of several edited texts that introduced and adored Xi Jinping's 'Marxist' media philosophy: his speeches and talks on the Party's media propaganda work in recent years (e.g., see *People's Daily*, 2018; *The Writing Group*, 2018).

Despite its marked and prolonged presence in China's official, media, and academic research discourse, and its significance for the understanding of the CCP's shifting media policy, a systematic critique of this new media ideological slogan and associated thought-remoulding campaign against Chinese journalists has remained absent in the literature. Within China, despite numerous publications about the subject from China's establishment Marxist press scholarship, the ultimate 'research' purpose of this body of literature as a whole – as will become clear – was to help piece together, justify, and promote the

predefined official 'Marxist view of journalism' discourse. In other words, lacking independent and critical investigation and analysis, these publications are hardly academic research but an integral part of the discourse itself. Outside China, despite some research on China's Marxist press in a broad sense, no specific and systematic (English-language) academic publication about the 'Marxist view of journalism' notion has been identified.

Stranahan's (1990) documentation of how a Maoist Party press doctrine was created in the early 1940s is a useful text that would help trace the ideological roots of the current campaign from a historical perspective. Lee's (2000) analysis of 'the emancipatory potential' of libertarian, humanist-Marxist, and radical-critical press ideas to China's journalism reforms is insightful and inspirational, though a more up-to-date study is needed for a better understanding of what has happened to the Marxist journalism/media discourse in China since then. In the meantime, some scholars also noted that due to the CCP's adoption of a more flexible post-communist market-authoritarian approach in the early 1990s, the 'Soviet Communist Press Theory' (Siebert et al., 1956) had become increasingly insufficient in conceptualising China's rapidly changing media landscape by the mid-1990s, particularly the early 2000s (e.g., He, 2000; Huang, 2003; Pei, 1994).

However, the demise of the Maoist version of communism as a rigid and utopian political ideology in the era of the 'socialist market economy' – at least in economic and social terms – as argued by these scholars by no means meant the death of the authoritarian tradition and associated media approach of the CCP, or the complete and permanent disappearance of all Maoist communist elements in post-Mao China's political and media systems (e.g., see McGregor, 2011). In other words, media commercialisation under China's continued one-party system and rule of man was more like a case of 'commercialisation without independence' (Chan, 1993) or 'professionalisation without guarantees' (Yu, 1994) as prewarned by some more cautious critics.

This warning was seemingly soon evidenced by the Hu administration's introduction of the 'Marxist view of journalism' education campaign in 2003 and, more recently, the Xi administration's exploitation of the notion to justify a more visible resurgence of the Party's deeply rooted, though at times temporarily or tactically relaxed, conservative authoritarian media tradition. Aiming to bridge the research gap concerning this development in the literature, in the pages that follow, this study examines the 'Marxist view of journalism' notion as discourse in context and its impact on, and implications for, Chinese journalism. The study also offered several general suggestions in relation to how the notion may be revisited and redeveloped.

## **The historical trajectory of the CCP's construction of a Chinese Marxist press**

To better understand the current 'Marxist view of journalism' requires a close look at the journey of the CCP's exploration and construction of a Chinese Marxist press ideology in changing historical contexts. While this journey may be traced back to the early years of the Chinese communist movement during the 1910s-1920s when some press ideas based on a Marxist critique of

capitalism and class were introduced in a very preliminary and fragmented manner, it was not until the early 1940s that a Chinese Marxist press approach was starting to take shape.

The early 1940s was a critical time in the CCP's history when the Party under Mao's control based in Yan'an in the northern Shaanxi province faced tough challenges. Among other things, Mao and his followers were concerned about not only the lingering influence of their political rivals within the Party, but also and perhaps more importantly, criticisms of its authoritarian ideology and politics from Yan'an's liberal-minded intelligentsia. It was in this context that Mao launched the influential Yan'an Rectification Movement, aiming to strengthen his political and ideological authority further and transform the CCP into a more centralised and disciplined political organisation (Compton, 1952; Meisner, 1977; Wylie, 1980).

As an integral part of this move, a press reform campaign was introduced to substantially centralise and tighten the Party's control of its media network (Fudan University, 1985; Stranahan, 1990; Wang, 1992). Aiming to justify this campaign theoretically, Mao and his followers suggested an allegedly superior 'new' proletarian press model to the 'old' libertarian press theory. Being influenced by Marxist political economy and class analysis, particularly Lenin's revolutionary press concept as typically reflected in his well-known statement that '[a] newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator but also a collective organiser' (Lenin, 1910), they centred their ideas on several what they called core 'characters' of the media. They included the media's 'class character', 'Party character', 'propaganda character', 'fighting character', 'organising character', and 'educational character'. Though seemingly diverse and sophisticated, these 'characters' were actually used to form a rather simple central argument like this: all media outlets had their class and party affiliation and served the interest of either the working class or the rich/ruling class and it thus became both natural and mandatory for a proletarian press to be absolutely and completely instrumentally used by the Communist Party as the revolutionary vanguard of the working class (e.g., Liu, 1948; Lu, 1943; Mao, 1942, 1948). As one editorial of the *Liberation Daily*, then official mouthpiece of the CCP Central Committee, declared, the Party's newspapers were 'the most powerful tools to influence the thoughts of the masses', and they 'must act by following the Party's will' and 'consider the Party's interest' (*Liberation Daily*, 1942).

This argument suggested an oversimplified and thus highly problematic dichotomy between a 'good' Communist Party-controlled propagandistic press that would necessarily represent the interest of the working class, and an 'evil', privately-owned Western/liberal press that would necessarily just serve the interest of the ruling/rich class. As a result, treating a proletarian and a liberal-capitalist press as two completely opposite and monolithic and homogeneous bodies, this argument totally ignored the institutionalised high degree of press freedom and associated professional journalistic codes in established capitalist liberal democracies, as well as a democratic-humanist Marxist tradition as shown in relevant works of Marx and Engel themselves and influential Marxist

thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci. If this Yan'an Maoist Party press doctrine can be called a Marxist press approach at all, it may be best described as a Sinicised Leninist/Soviet interpretation of an imagined Marxist press.

After the CCP took power in 1949, this Maoist Party press doctrine became the official press ideology of the newly established PRC, while the Soviet-style socialist media economics based on state ownership and subsidy, bureaucratic management style, and official subscription using taxpayers' money were also incorporated into it. In the meantime, commercial-professional journalism, which had been widely practised in the pre-1949 years by the private media industry, was completely dumped. This radical change invited widespread criticisms, particularly during the Hundred Flowers Campaign launched by Mao in mid-1956 for the supposed purpose of offering the public an opportunity to voice their opinions about the new communist regime. Typically, for example, Wang Zhong, the late journalism professor of Shanghai-based Fudan University, called for a market-socialist press model, arguing the necessity of bringing the commercial-professional mechanism back and incorporating it into the new socialist press system. In short, refuting the rigidly Party-controlled, completely state-subsided, and overly propaganda-oriented existing socialist press system, Wang called for a journalistically and financially vibrant socialist press based on market competition and a high degree of editorial autonomy. Wang's idea and Wang himself were, however soon, harshly criticised and repressed (Wang, 2004).

In the post-Mao era, this Party press doctrine was once again questioned in the 1980s. Despite the forceful return of Wang's market-socialist press idea, China's reformist Marxist writers challenged the doctrine further by calling for a legally protected socialist 'free' press. Being theoretically inspired by neo-Marxist thinking in Europe, they argued that the CCP's traditional understanding of Marxism and Marxist journalism needed to be substantially revisited from a humanist Marxist perspective as reflected in the works of liberal Marx in his youth against authoritarian Marxism as reflected in the works of mature Marx and his totalitarian followers like Lenin, Stalin, and Mao (e.g., Su, 1992; Wang, 1986). When it came to journalism, they called for transforming China's rigidly censored and state-monopolised media into one that should be based on more diverse media ownership, a high degree of editorial autonomy, sound ethical-professional standards, and relaxed state regulation via a media law (e.g., Hu, 1989; Sun, 1986).

## **'Marxist view of journalism': New jargon, old idea**

In the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, the discussion of a humanist Marxist press approach ended abruptly. This was then followed by more than a decade of rapid media commercialisation triggered by Deng Xiaoping's call for further reform and opening in 1992 and later China's WTO entry in 2001 (Lee, 2003; Zhao, 1998), suggesting the CCP's large acceptance of the market-socialist press approach as a pragmatic middle-course between the orthodox Maoist Party press doctrine and the more enlightened humanist-Marxist press initiative (while a liberal press model was, and still is, never considered as an option).

By the early 2000s, China's media landscape had been substantially changed with such mixed outcomes as the rise of self-sufficient popular media outlets, the practice of critical-investigative journalism, experiment with partial media privatisation, the rise of new media and citizen journalism, as well as concerns about rampant journalistic corruption and poor professional-ethical standards (Cho, 2014; Huang, 2016; Svensson, 2017; Tong, 2011; Yu, 2011; Zhao, 1998). The Party-state, while excitedly seeing the previously heavily loss-making and state-subsided media sector's now strong market performance and financial viability, was also deeply worried that media commercialisation might spill over to challenge its authoritarian rule. It was in this context that the CCP's new leadership led by Hu introduced the 'Marxist view of journalism' notion, aiming to ensure the media industry's more 'healthy' and 'balanced' development.

Nearly two decades have passed since its introduction in 2003, the notion has virtually offered nothing theoretically new, but been used as a new slogan to justify a more conservative media policy since then, particularly in the era of Xi since 2012. To date, what China's state-affiliated establishment Marxist media scholarship could have done with the notion is to use it as a fashionable new term to repackage nearly whatever existing press ideas and practices that are officially deemed as 'Marxist' (politically and ideologically 'correct'). Typically, for example, Chen Lidan, China's leading Marxist media scholar at Renmin University of China, in his ambitious 756-page *The Thought System of Marxist View of Journalism* (2006), referred 'Marxist view of journalism' to the 'entire contents' in relation to the Marxist approach to 'information communication, propaganda, journalism, culture, communication policy, internal exchange of ideas within (communist) organisations, and etc'. More specifically, it was about 'certain principles, concepts, and guidelines by which the Party-led journalism and communication industry, as well as the Party-led wider cultural industry, should politically comply with' (Chen, 2006, pp. 1, 5). This description was later nearly identically adopted by the official *Journalist Training Textbook* as referred to earlier and thus arguably became the quasi-official definition of the term.

This is a very confusing and controversial definition considering its failure to clearly conceptually separate journalism (which may be referred to the activities, or the products of such activities, that aim to provide the public with truthful news and information and hold power, particularly the government, accountable) from such very different concepts as party propaganda and government media policy. This move was a concerning retreat from the existing consensus among most Chinese media critics and journalists that news/journalism must not be conceptually mixed up with party propaganda, a significant outcome from a decade of fierce debate on the matter in the 1980s and more than a decade of media commercialisation and associated professional journalistic development since the 1990s (Cheek, 1989; Gan, 1982; He, 2000; Huang, 2001; Pan & Chan, 2003; Pan & Lu, 2003; Wang, 2004). Interestingly, this was also exactly the kind of conservative press approach that Chen himself profoundly distasted at the height of the debate on media institutional reforms in the highly reform-spirited late 1980s (e.g., see relevant articles collected in Chen, 2004; Gang, 1988).

Based on the definition mentioned above, Chen presented a what he called the theoretical system of Marxist view of journalism by carefully synthesising and discussing a wide range of highly selective, often self-contradictory, and

predominantly propaganda- and media policy-related ideas, policies, and practices in international and Chinese communist movements, lacking a clear logical and theoretical framework and critical analysis.

Those ideas, policies, and practices ranged from Marx and Engels' early liberal press approach against the Prussian press and publishing censorship to their emphasis on the 'Party spirit' of the proletarian press in their late years. It continued with Lenin's emphasis on newspapers' role as tools of mass propaganda, to Stalin's nationalisation and bureaucratisation of the press. This was followed by including Mao's notions of 'newspapers are tools of class struggle' and the directive that 'undertaking journalistic work, one must run newspapers from a political perspective'. Chen also saw communist leaders' pragmatic and often opportunistic call for press freedom against bourgeois governments in the revolutionary years and their ruthless media control policy in the post-revolutionary era as part of the so-called scientific 'Marxist view of journalism'. He also believed that there was a case of 'Marxist' emphasis of media commercialisation, management, and technological revolution (Chen, 2006).

In the meantime, understandably (considering the high political-ideological sensitivity of such matters in the Chinese context), Chen's book completely shied away from some anti-democratic 'Marxist' media texts and practices – notably, for example, Mao's notorious attacks against his 'rightist' critics during the 1957 Anti-Right campaign (e.g., see Union Research Institute, 1976).

The introduction of the notion of the 'Marxist view of journalism' and associated education campaigns against Chinese journalists over the years has gone hand in hand with a conservative move in Chinese politics and media policy, particularly in the era of Xi. In the Hu era (2003-2012), the notion was seemingly mainly used to tactically deal with the challenges resulting from media commercialisation occurring since the early 1990s. In other words, the Hu administration intended to use the term to emphasise the media's political, social, and professional responsibility to help maintain social stability in a more general sense. As a result, under Hu, there was still considerable room for investigative journalism and even greater space for mass-appeal popular journalism. In particular, the practice of watchdog journalism was highlighted by some significant cases, notably, the extensive media coverage and critique of the Sun Zhigang incident in Guangzhou in 2003, which eventually led to the abolition of the profoundly flawed custody and repatriation system (e.g., see Yu, 2006).

In comparison, 'Marxist view of journalism' has been further and more intensively used by the Xi administration to impose a far more conservative and rigid media policy. Typically, for example, together with his other similar speeches and talks, Xi's nerve-racking open declaration of the media's set role as the Party's 'propaganda fronts' and their default obligation to 'have the party as their family name' and 'love the party, protect the party, and closely align themselves with the party leadership in thought, politics and action' (Associated Press, 2016) has been described by China's Marxist media scholars as the 'newest development' of the 'Marxist view of journalism' (*People's Daily*, 2018).

Such Maoist media rhetoric and associated media policy have concerned many critics. Notable criticisms include the 'resurgence' of the propaganda-oriented Party newspapers and the 'death' of the commercially oriented popular newspapers (Huang, 2021; Wang & Sparks, 2018), the proactive involvement of the Chinese Party-state in China's journalism education and training (Xu, 2018), and the 'almost extinct' of Chinese investigative journalism/journalists (Gao, 2018; Hernández, 2019; see also Cheek & Ownby, 2018; Svensson, 2017; Tong, 2019).

In short, the 'Marxist view of journalism' notion has ended up being largely a rebranded version of the same Party propaganda-oriented old authoritarian press tradition of the CCP that originated in Yan'an. Theoretically, the notion not only lacks a clear, coherent, and logically sound conceptual framework but also takes a largely backward-looking approach which have made it a highly illogical and conservative mishmash. Contributing little to China's long-overdue and much needed journalistic ideological innovation, it has not only completely excluded European/neo-Marxist critique of the practice of repressive and ideological state apparatuses and China's own humanist-Marxist writers' ideas about media institutional reforms in the 1980s, but also (particularly more recently) even considerably retreated from the encouraging professional journalistic development emerged from media commercialisation since the 1990s.

Like numerous forced thought-remoulding campaigns in the CCP's history, the Party's wish to persuade or force China's journalism community to 'wholeheartedly' accept and follow the 'Marxist view of journalism' is likely to be counterproductive and doomed to fail. For example, the compulsory 'Marxist view of journalism' curriculum in China's journalism schools has already suffered an embarrassing situation of being 'downplayed by the universities, taught in a passive manner by the staff, and badly received by students' (Zhou, 2017). The notion may have successfully sent a clear warning to China's press community, demanding its continued loyalty and support to the Party-state. However, attempting to 'convince' people by power, rather than trying to negotiate with them with an enlightened, forward-looking alternative press ideology, shows neither political vision nor intellectual wisdom.

## **A 'Marxist view of journalism' or not: Getting the basics right**

Whether the 'Marxist view of journalism' as discussed above may be deemed as a 'Marxist' press approach in any sense may be a debatable issue, given the complexity of Marxism as a term itself (a detailed discussion of this matter is however beyond the scope of this paper). Nevertheless, it may be safe to at least argue that it is neither the so-called most scientific version of Marxist press nor a superior press model to the libertarian press theory as the CCP and China's Marxist press scholarship have always claimed.

Indeed, it is even hardly a Marxist press approach that makes basic logical sense. From a classical Marxist perspective, the state ownership structure of China's media industry may be arguably deemed as one and perhaps the only Marxist element in the current Chinese media system. But even this has been



substantially compromised by the country's one-party political system, as the Party-state's political as well as ownership controls of media would inevitably lead to the loss of editorial autonomy and corruption. From a neo-Marxist perspective, China's repressive political-media system based on authoritarian state capitalism may be seen as ultimately anti-Marxist.

If the CCP continues to justify its decaying conservative authoritarian media system by peddling the 'Marxist view of journalism' as an 'old wine in a new bottle'-like discourse and refusing any serious revisiting of the notion, it will likely suffer further media ideological legitimacy crisis and system decay. Rebranding without serious revision and redevelopment is merely recycling and cannot go far. Alternatively, if the Party believes or insists that due to some genuine and sensible political, ideological, and geopolitical concerns it has little choice but to stick to the 'Marxist view of journalism' notion (or whatever 'right' and 'proper' name it may want to use to make semiotic sense of its press system under the one-party rule and state capitalism) at this stage of China's transition to modernity, it must at least get the basics right. This is to say that it must redefine and reinvent the notion and transform it into a 'Marxist' press approach that makes basic sense, namely: to meet such common-sense benchmarks as being logically sound, journalistically meaningful, historically progressive, and practically sensible.

Like in any other societies, a substantial media ideological innovation in China would be a complex and complicated project and need enormous courage, wisdom, and efforts to deal with a variety of associated challenges. It is not my intention to attempt a detailed roadmap for this challenging and delicate task in this short article. Rather, I am trying to offer some general but hopefully useful thoughts here that may help stimulate further discussion and debate about possible ways to seriously but also sensibly revisit the current 'Marxist view of journalism' notion:

First, revisiting the notion should start by noting that there is no such thing as a universally recognised standard Marxist journalism theory, and the notion itself is certainly no such theory in any sense. China's Marxist media researchers always argue that classical Marxist writers and relevant communist (including CCP) leaders have advanced a series of 'insightful' ideas on 'journalism' (though, in fact, predominantly about media propaganda), but none of them could have spared time to write a specific journalism theory text. And it thus becomes their job, as 'true' Marxists and Marxist media researchers, to summarise and interpret those ideas in a systematic way. And this goal has been, as far as they are concerned, largely achieved already. Furthermore, they insisted that the 'Marxist view of journalism' notion advanced by them is *the* (only real and authentic version of), not just a, Marxist journalism theory (e.g., Gan, 1982; Chen, 2016). These are, however, profoundly dubious arguments, for historically no classic Marxist writers and communist leaders, including Marx and Engels themselves, have ever advanced an explicit, systematic alternative journalism theory beyond the libertarian theory of journalism.

Marx and Engels's ideas in relation to media focused largely on critiquing capital control of media in the West rather than constructing an alternative journalism theory. In comparison, communist leaders have first and foremost talked about

media through the lens of political propaganda. It may be more accurate to say that there are diverse and competing Marxist critiques of journalism/media and Marxist ideas about possible alternative press models and practices, and the Chinese interpretation and practice (which lack no contradictions and controversies) may be seen as part of this broadly and loosely described 'Marxist' press approach and movement. It should also be noted that historically, many classic Marxist writers and communist leaders, including Marx and Engels themselves, benefitted greatly from free liberal media outlets in spreading their ideas. A meaningful 'Marxist' (re)view of journalism without an honest and dialectic critique of the liberal press theory and associated professional journalistic experiences and codes would be impossible.

Second, it needs to be made clear that the CCP and China's Marxist press scholarship's claiming of the 'Marxist view of journalism' notion as the so-called most scientific press theory is both logically and historically dishonest. The only 'evidence' that they have collectively used to support this claim is that: because the 'Marxist view of journalism' is an integral part of Marxism as (allegedly) the most scientific social theory in history – the unquestionable 'holy' major premise of the CCP's entire 'Marxist' belief, or more accurately, propaganda, so, the 'logic' goes, it naturally becomes the so-called most scientific press theory (ideology) (e.g., see Chen, 2006; 2010; 2011; Lin, 2005; Zheng, 2005, 2011, 2018; Zhu, 2010). As discussed, the 'Marxist view of journalism' is essentially an ideology about the instrumental use of media. As a set of preconceived and rigid beliefs or doctrines about the media's political function, a media ideology is different from a journalism theory as a set of empirically provable knowledge about, as far as the liberal press theory is concerned, news communication that aims to inform the public and hold power accountable (e.g., see Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Ideology does not have to (and arguably often does not) have theoretical value, while a 'good' theory may be held by some as nearly an ideology. In short, the 'Marxist view of journalism' notion is neither a theory (an empirically provable hypothesis), nor has much to do with journalism (activities, or products of such activities, that aim to inform the public).

When the notion was advanced in 2003, China experienced a severe public health crisis caused by the SARS epidemic. Seventeen years later, in 2020, China faced a disastrous coronavirus outbreak – COVID-19. Ironically, on both occasions, China's official media outlets, guided by this so-called most scientific journalism theory, completely failed to promptly warn the public about the deadly viruses and potentially help avoid these becoming a pandemic. While for others, the claim mentioned above may sound amusing, in the Chinese context, like many other similar cases of 'the emperor's new cloths' in the country's political life, it is however a very serious business, and few would take the risk to openly challenge it. This once again demonstrates the notion as an outdated media ideology that has become completely irrelevant to contemporary China's social and news communication reality in the globalised digital media era. Rather than making boastful and empty claims, China's ruling elite needs to take a deep breath and make a serious commitment to media ideological innovation and journalistic institutional reforms.

Third, revisiting the 'Marxist view of journalism' would also require to remove party propaganda as its core value and replace it with a more modern value system from a humanist/democratic Marxist approach that appreciates the commonly accepted professional journalistic view of media as legally protected independent information providers and watchdogs of public interest. Failing to do so would make a meaningful media ideological innovation and transformation impossible.

Until recently, Chinese media had seemingly gradually, though often discursively, begun to go down this path. This trend, as noted earlier, was typically reflected in the fierce debate around the relationship between journalism and propaganda between reformist and conservative critics in the early 1980s, humanist Marxist critics' call for legally protected socialist press freedom in the middle and late 1980s, and media commercialisation towards a more market-oriented media system and media-journalists-centred newsroom culture and the emergence of watchdog/investigative journalism during the 1990s and the early 2000s.

However, since the early 2010s, there has been a reverse trend of propaganda advancing and journalism retreating resulting from a conservative ideological and media policy shift under Xi. It is true that propagandistic use of the media is – to various extents – a worldwide phenomenon (unbiased, propaganda-free media simply do not exist), and the relationship between journalism and propaganda can be complex and complicated in media practice. This fact, however, does not justify setting Party propaganda as the core value of journalism in China or anywhere. Continuing to openly promote a Party propaganda-centred authoritarian 'Marxist' press ideology and attempting to use it to respond to criticisms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would only damage further the image of the Chinese Party-state and China's soft power.

Fourth, the CCP and China's Marxist press scholarship do have the right to criticise privately-owned Western media for their flaws, including their 'Orientalist' coverage of 'the other', including China. They should, however, not assume that this critique can be conveniently used to justify China's own authoritarian 'Marxist' press system. Historical experience tells that a state-owned authoritarian press like China's lacks not only autonomy to take an independent and more diverse approach to international news coverage but also and more importantly, freedom to criticise domestic politics. Nor should they use this critique to falsely convince themselves that they can skip a democratic political-media change and muddle through to real modernity. Indeed, ultimately, what (neo)Marxism is really concerned about media is their institutionally guaranteed right to practice socially responsible press freedom in the public interest against both state control and capital control of media and society.

Fifth, Marxist journalism should also not be simplistically equated to state-owned journalism. When it comes to the issue of media ownership, Chinese media critics often challenge mainstream Western media and defend China's own through a crude and dubious Marxist 'state (good) vs private (evil) media ownership' framework. Media ownership type is just one – though an important one – factor at play in journalism and is always connected to other factors in the process of news production. The private ownership of Western media does not

necessarily mean they would always or can freely or easily manipulate their power against the public interest because of relevant legal regulations, professional-ethical codes, and market competition.

Likewise, suggesting China's state-owned journalism would necessarily and always serve the interest of the public is also against both political common sense and the journalistic history of the PRC. From a neo-Marxist perspective, the real issue regarding media ownership is essentially about diversification against (both state and private) monopolisation. In this context, China really does not have to choose between the two polarised major media ownership forms: its own mode of state monopoly of media resources and the Western model of full-fledged media privatisation. Instead, the country may consider a more flexible and dynamic mixed media ownership structure consisting of state, private, public, community, and social/self-media.

Sixth, revisiting the current Marxist press ideology would also require redefining the role and status of China's Marxist press scholarship. Unless it is to be transformed into an independent academic research body or a vibrant media think-tank of the CCP with considerable autonomy from its current role as a passive extension of the ideological state apparatuses, the stagnation of China's Marxist journalism studies and media theory research at large is likely to continue. In the meantime, it is also important for China's Marxist press scholarship to keep pushing the boundaries of the current political-ideological status quo.

Finally, it may be safe to predict that unless China follows a wholesale Westernisation path of modernity, a non-Western Chinese press system – regardless of whether it is a substantially revised version of the current 'Marxist view of journalism' notion or another form of press approach with Chinese characteristics – would likely continue to face Western criticisms in foreseen future due to complex geopolitical reasons and 'clash of civilisations'. Instead of passively defending its system by using an old-fashioned and out-of-touch Leninist-Maoist rhetoric and giving the world an impression of backwardness in terms of both style and substance, the CCP may learn something from Singapore as a Westernised Confucian society.

The late Singaporean leader Lee Kuan-Yew impressed the world (though not uncontroversially) with his confidence and capacity to defend his country's hybrid, and illiberal democratic political-media system under state capitalism from a social-cultural perspective. Despite post-Mao Chinese leaders' 'obsession' with the Singaporean model (Ortmann & Thompson, 2014), they are seemingly still nowhere near yet to develop an equally competent and modernised soft-authoritarian alternative system.

A serious revisiting of the current conservative authoritarian 'Marxist view of journalism' notion should become China's political-media elite's soul-searching for a sensible new press ideology that is capable to effectively address the key conceptual and institutional concerns in relation to China's media system. Achieve this goal, they must break away from continuing being deadlocked in a classical authoritarian dilemma (though this dilemma may, to various extents, also exists in other societies): as the existing ideology becomes utterly outdated

and suffers a severe legitimate crisis and needs to be substantially and urgently revisited through bold and creative theoretical imagination, the power-hungry and conservatively stubborn political superstructure would nearly always intend to keep the status quo. Failing to do this would mean prolonged stagnation and decay of the whole political-media system.

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