

Free from Politics?

Chinese Environmental Journalists Between Neutrality and Commitment

By Nolwenn Salmon

This study of China's environmental journalists gives us an insight into the way they navigate the constraints of the Chinese media and their way of conceiving of politics, professionalism and their role as journalists.

Environmental journalists play a highly political role. Those who can be described as committed not only want to show another side of the environmental issues than the official one but also want to influence their management and to fight for some political issues. Yet since the middle of the 2000 the discourse of neutral and objective expertise has become the hallmark of environmental journalists seeking to emancipate themselves from the Party's grip and be recognized as competent professionals. The assertion of a form of professionalization which values the model of apolitical experts complicates the relationship to their own practice: it makes it difficult to reconcile their desire of professionalization with their deep aspiration to transform Chinese society through their writing. How can we explain the tension felt by those journalists between this double aspiration? I argue in this article that the contemporary Chinese conception of politics plays a significant role in this process.

The conclusions rely on more than 80 interviews, on participant observations, analysis of official documents, newspaper articles, blogs and microblogs. In this analysis I focus on journalists obsessed by *zhuan'yehua*¹, (professionalization and expertise), who are particularly representative of the young generation born in the 80s and the 90s. In contrary the old generation born before the middle of the 1950s is proud of mixing journalism and activism and is not striving to be neutral professionals. In between, the middle age group is heterogeneous, combining both cases.

Environmental journalism belongs to the so-called grey zone of journalism. It does not belong to the black zone which corresponds to highly sensitive topics such as human rights, Taiwan or Tibet for which the official version of facts is the only one acceptable. But environmental journalism is still related to key political questions such as transparency of information, political decision-making process, defense of citizen's rights, energy policies, the Chinese model of development and so on. By covering environmental issues, journalists can talk indirectly about some political questions that they cannot cover directly. By so doing they are pushing the boundaries of what they can write and contribute to influence the practice of power: they want to change the system by staying inside. They want to use their articles, knowledge and, sometimes, social networks to influence society and sometimes the political system: they are committed but not dissidents.

The Paradoxical Insistence on Professionalism and Expertise

During my fieldworks, I have been stricken by the insistence of the young journalists on the words *zhuan'ye* and *zhuan'yehua* (professional and the process of becoming professional). To say it briefly those Chinese terms have altogether the meaning of professionalism, professionalization and expertise. Nonetheless, all of

¹ Due to the fieldwork constraints the young journalists that I have interviewed are largely employed in more liberal newspapers, widely considered as the elite of Chinese journalism and consequently more preoccupied by the question of professional legitimacy. They may also be more appealed by fighting against their mouthpiece role than others. My conclusion may then not be relevant for young journalists working in very official newspapers, though it is worth mentioning that the notion of professionalization is also present in some of those newspapers' presentation and in some journalists' interviews.

those terms could have different meanings depending on countries (Hallin et Mancini, 2004).

By examining the discourse of Chinese journalists I understood that *zhuan* and *zhuan* were automatically but not always very consciously associated to a set of different notions: objectivity, independence, neutrality, rationality, that should also be analyzed to understand their meaning for Chinese journalists² (Salmon, 2016). To sum up, those Chinese journalists insist on what is usually called the American or Anglo-Saxon model of professionalism (Neveu, 2004 ; Hassid, 2011), that I consider as an apparently apolitical model of journalism. One reason is that the theories of professionalism has been widely widespread in its American version emphasizing those criteria (Hassid, 2011 ; Dombernowsky, 2014 ; Salmon, 2016). And even though many journalists have not followed journalistic courses at University – 45,2% in 2016 (Zhou et Zhou 2016) – the doxa is that Western journalism represents a model encompassing professionalism, objectivity, independence and neutrality. This is reinforced by many Westerners who don't hesitate to underline, when they meet Chinese journalists, that Chinese journalists are not following the norms of professionalism (interviews 2011-2014): focusing on the censorship and the role of propaganda tool, they stress the abnormality of the Chinese press which cannot play the role of the "fourth estate". By explicit or implicit comparison, they emphasize the independence and the neutrality of the press of democratic countries, building an idealistic model of objectivity and independence. Chinese journalists are also often not aware that those notions are debated in democratic countries and that there is not a unique way of being professional in Western countries and elsewhere (Liu Jianqiang 2013, interviews 2011-2014). Moreover, the association of professionalism with objectivity, independence and neutrality relies on a crucial norm of journalism : the "enunciative distancing norm" (*norme de distanciation énonciative*) (Lemieux, 2004), that is to say the necessity for the writing of the journalist to be distinct from the viewpoint of the source. But this norm, which is nowadays crucial in journalism, is not always clearly separate from the necessity of being a purely objective and neutral recorder of facts. Being completely objective is impossible, a fact which they are more or less clearly aware of, but this absolute continues to be the point from which they evaluate themselves. The consequence is that through this lens their willingness to be committed appeared to be illegitimate. I have indeed been stricken by the unease and the contradictions they encountered while claiming to follow this model of professionalism. Why do they insist so much on a model of professionalism while it

² On the difference of those notion according to countries see (Lemieux, 2004)

conflicts precisely with the mission that most of them want to complete as journalists: to use their writing for changing Chinese society, fight for a better environment and criticize some policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)?

Looking for Legitimacy

Those young journalists certainly emphasize their apolitical *zhuanyehua* because I am a Western scholar interviewing them. To say it briefly they globally depreciate Chinese journalism compared to Western journalism and insist on their *zhuanyehua*, objectivity and independence to legitimize their work. It represents a criterion of good journalism, to them. And since they are convinced that it is also the symbol of good journalism in my country as in all democratic countries, they are using this model as a way to distinguish the quality of their own work from average Chinese journalism.

But this discourse is not only built for me during the interview. Their articles and the conferences they organize reveal that those terms are crucial for them. It can be partly explained as an appropriate answer for several problems they encounter but it must not be reduced to an instrumental strategy. I will explain first why apolitical professionalization and expertise are so meaningful for Chinese environmental journalists and then why this discourse is also a double-edged sword.

To begin with, claiming objective professionalism is a way of fighting against the image of a corrupted profession. In China, journalism has indeed been tarnished by many scandals of paid journalism during the 1990s especially. Moreover, as journalists are facing the challenge of the internet and citizen journalism, this discourse is also a means to maintain their status and to show that their work is still necessary. As professionals, they offer in-depth analysis and reliable articles. They have the required skills and follow the ethical norms of their profession: “That’s why society needs [us]”³.

Zhuanyehua is more and more important (...) After the rapid rise of commercial media and especially of what we call social media like Facebook or *weixin*, we must

³ I translate: Liu Jianqiang in “Meiti de huanjing zeren” (Environmental responsibility of media), “2013 zhongguo zuijia huanjing baodao jiang” *banjiang yantao hui* (Conference for the Awards ceremony of the “China Environmental Press Awards 2013”), Renmin University, Beijing, 2013.

become more *zhuan'yehua* if we want that the general public, [our] listener or audience accept what we say⁴.

Besides, the model of professional journalism has emerged as a competitor and an alternative to the Party journalism that was almost hegemonic when Mao was leading the country (Pan et Chan, 2003 ; Tong, 2011). Those who want to free themselves from the role of mouthpiece of the Party tend to stress what appears to be the opposite model of journalism that is to say objectivity, independence, impartiality and devotion to the truth. In addition, claiming to be an apolitical expert is a way to indirectly legitimize more autonomy. They have their domain of expertise that the Party should respect: professional journalists have specific skills and are consequently the most legitimate people for taking decisions in this realm. They are in so doing using the rhetoric that the Party has used itself since the end of the cultural revolution and even more since the beginning of the reforms in 1978-1979 (Alford, Winston et Kirby, 2011). The professionalization discourse can find arguments in the "Four Modernizations" (agriculture, industry, national defense, science and technology) theory first promoted by Zhou Enlai and put into practice in Deng Xiaoping's era. Deng Xiaoping promoted specialization and professionalization as a necessary component of the modernization process. It has given journalists an official basis to claim for more professionalization and expertise and meanwhile seek for more autonomy. Moreover, this discourse is also a way to protect themselves. By emphasizing neutrality, objectivity and expertise, they want to diminish the subversive dimension of their articles, arguing that they are merely asserting facts. Although it is clearly not a guarantee against the repression of the Party, it is still safer and less provocative than claiming to be activists.

All the above-mentioned reasons seem to correspond to a purely strategic attitude. However, the adhesion to the discourse of apolitical *zhuan'yehua* is clearly much more than strategic. Young environmental journalists really believe that this kind of journalism represents a model of good journalism and, in a sense, they seek to conform to this discourse. In China the notion of *zhuan'yehua* became more and more crucial from the end of the 1970s to the 2000s. This generation grew up in a time where professionalism was equated to quality, seriousness and reliability. Consequently, it is more complicated for them to call into question this notion than for older generations that have also been imbued with other normative models.

⁴ I translate (Huang Gonggong, April 2012) Name has been changed.

The rhetoric of professionalism and apolitical expertise is a global tendency we can observe in other countries and professions that is particularly important for young journalistic specialties that are still not fully recognized (Comby, 2009 ; Padioleau, 1976 ; Lévêque, 2000; Ollitrault, 2001). The reason is that expertise and professionalism are socially valued as pledges of credibility and seriousness. The discourse of apolitical *zhuanyehua* corresponds perfectly to what Catherine Paradeise calls a “travail de ressourcement en légitimité” (“work for regaining legitimacy”) (Paradeise, 1985). She explains that the discourse of expertise is a way of gaining public support: an occupation can be recognized or not as a profession depending on the argumentation that workers are able to construct and convey. In this rhetorical process the notion of expert is particularly powerful since it is anchored in the notions of truth and science, the links between needs and science, technical competences and universalistic knowledge. The expertise is then important regarding to the way societies consider journalists, established journalists consider new specialties but also to the way journalists consider themselves and their own work. Being professional and expert in its own journalistic domain is crucial for this young generation to feel legitimate.

The discourse of apolitical professionalization and expertise is even more important for environmental journalists than for other Chinese journalists. The insistence of the young generation on this model of professionalism is a reaction to critics that have targeted the environmental journalists in the middle of the 2000s. At the end of the 1990s and especially the beginning of the 2000s, environmental journalists with the help of environmental associations and some Party officials have gained some major environmental battles by using their writings as weapons for their struggles. For example, they managed to stop the construction of a complex of dams on the Nu river with an estimated capacity equivalent to the Three gorges one. But, in 2005 a controversy erupted between some vocal scientists and environmental journalists and activists. Basically, the scientists accused environmental journalists of being incompetent, superstitious, unscientific, partial and of being paid by foreign powers. The young journalists then tried to defend themselves. This was particularly important for them because environmental journalism was at that time a young journalistic domain in China, which was still not fully recognized as a journalistic specialty at least until the end of my fieldwork in 2014. Environmental journalists were fighting for social, professional and personal recognition back then. They were trying to build a new image of environmental journalists by emphasizing expertise, objectivity, rationality and independency in order to counter those accusations and regain legitimacy.

In France Sandrine Lévêque (Lévêque, 2000) observes that for social journalists, the relationship between expertise and commitment is inverted whereas in China the claim of objective expertise and the discourse and practice of commitment coexist. Those who insist on the necessity of objective and independent *zhuan'yehua* generally want meanwhile to exercise influence on society and politics: Gao Shengke a journalist of *Caijing magazine* which has won with Wang Kai the prize of the best investigation of the year in the China Environmental Press Awards 2013 proclaims for example: "Making a report is not so important, what is important is how to fix [a problem]"⁵.

This double aspiration therefore generates unease and paradox that can be expressed in a variety of manners from denial to undisguised aporia. For example, Liu Hongqiao which has been employed in *Southern Metropolis* after doing an internship in Caixin clearly recognizes its confusion.

Liu Hongqiao: Sometimes the media is unconsciously helping the NGO in their policy advocacy (...). The situation in China now is still very, well... It is not groundless, it is not abnormal, but(...) It's just that according to me, I find it weird. It is still a very new step for Chinese environmental protection, environmental movement and environmental reporting (...) but I think we should be cautious, I feel puzzled, confused. I am still not clear, we need to continue to debate that.⁶

A Problematic Tendency to Commitment?

It is difficult for my interviewees to conceive that a model of committed journalism acting for the transformation of society is as legitimate as trying to correspond to the model of the so-called apolitical professionalism. A relevant example is that some of them try to justify themselves: they argue that it is because the Chinese situation is specific that they must be committed. This situation is however expected to disappear with the improvement of the Chinese situation. In other words, they believe that their willingness to commitment is abnormal. In their view, commitment seems to be legitimate only in specific conditions, it appears to be in tension with professionalism: they don't conceive that reconciling professionalism and commitment, expertise and commitment could be a legitimate model of journalism. In

⁵ I translate: Liu Jianqiang in "Meiti de huanjing zeren", *op.cit.*

⁶ I translate (Interview March 2013).

Western Europe and the United States, we are so familiar with the model of apolitical journalism, that as those journalists we may also forget that other models of professionalism exist. Though, as Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini explain, other legitimate models of professionalism exist that reconcile professionalism and activism such as for example the North/Central European or Democratic Corporatist Model (Hallin et Mancini, 2004).

Since the large majority of them don't want to be simple recorders of facts in the end but want to use their privileged position to exert a positive influence on Chinese social and environmental situation, the inner conflict aroused with the objective and neutral model of professionalism push them to claim even more radically the principles of objectivity and independence in order to persuade people and themselves that they actually are competent professionals. The difficulty of calling into question the apolitical model of professional journalism is grounded in a lack of self-confidence as a Chinese journalist and as a young environmental journalist that usually has not received any academic training or scientific training in environmental studies.

The Golden Trap of Yearning to Be Free From Politics

This conception of apolitical professional journalism is influenced by journalists' conception of politics. Politics in its narrow sense is such a powerful deterrent for them that it absorbs the broader sense of politics. Politics for them is *zhengzhi*, and *zhengzhi* is what they learned at school during political courses, where the theories of communism is taught in an official and off-putting way, and no other words exist to think about politics in a broader sense. For them politics is equivalent to control, submission to the official line and factional struggles. Consequently, they try to escape from politics and think that they can be more independent and autonomous if they reach an apolitical realm of journalism. They are in fact not rejecting politics, as we understand politics in its broader sense in English or French, they are just willing to stay away from the Party line and faction struggles.

In the case of environmental journalists at least, this rejection of politics is specific to the young generation. The previous generation of journalists have rejected their mouthpiece role and expressed their critical voices, but they assume their political role and the necessity of being involved in faction struggles or conflicts of

interest to act as activists. The young generation wants to be recognized as the fourth power, to be critical without being involved in those factional struggles. This willingness is also reinforced by their less powerful, if not inexistent, political network that makes it difficult for them to compete on this realm with older journalists. But in China it is impossible to be critical without any political support.

The hope to be free from politics pushes young environmental journalists to claim to be apolitical. Yet, it doesn't fit with their aspirations of changing society and the willingness of most of them to criticize the Chinese model of modernization and development. It is a multi-dimensional trap because it first complicates the possibility of being critical, since it requires accepting to find some political support. Secondly, it complicates their acceptance of commitment, since it makes them feel illegitimate to be committed. Finally, it complicates the criticisms and opposition to the model of modernization promoted by the Party and which is at the core of the environmental protection debate. Indeed, this model of modernization based on the idea of progress is directly linked to the promotion of efficacy, production, rationalization, technical performance, expertise and specialization. Those values are not neutral but carrying a model of society. To be recognized as legitimate, environmental journalists want to adopt the rhetoric of apolitical expertise but if they adopt the language of expertise and a technocratic logic to voice criticism, it limits their critical potential. It is especially obvious in the environmental realm where profound criticisms of infrastructure planning for example question the technocratic logic in itself and the search for rationality, efficiency and productivity as a primary principle. Apparently apolitical, the notion of apolitical expertise is in fact a powerful tool serving the dominant norms and model devoted to economic development and modernization. It is precisely because young environmental journalists are deeply influenced by these dominant values, partly convinced and partly resisting to them, that the conflict between different kinds of journalism is so intensely felt.

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