China’s News Media:
Transition Shaped by Power and Money

Dr. Juyan Zhang, UTSA’s own Assistant Professor of the Department of Communication, gave a lecture on August 31, 2010 titled China’s News Media: Transition Shaped by Power and Money. Through the use of narratives and current events Dr. Zhang examined the changes made throughout China’s history. Many guests from both on and off campus attended the event.

The lecture opened with an anecdote about Yuanjiang Li, a man who Dr. Zhang used to work for. Yuanjiang Li was the president of the Guangzhou Daily Press Group, China’s first commercialized press group, as well as the Minister of Publicity of the Guangzhou Municipal Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. He was arrested for accepting bribes. To understand how a man can simultaneously be part of the press and the government, Doctor Zhang gave a brief history of China’s news media and explained the power structure of the government.

In 1937, it was established that the media should serve the party and the masses. When the Chinese Communist Party took over, media was nationalized and journalists were brought into the bureaucracy. Control over media was very rigid. After Mao’s death, a reform started. Control loosened and the media could expose and criticize. However, in 1989 journalists joined in a protest and control was tightened once again. In 1992 China became more commercialized and the state subsidy of newspapers stopped. By 1996 the first commercialized press group had been created. As time went on, the news groups became more and more commercialized and now the media is semi-independent.

This semi-independence stems from a few economic changes. The first change is that groups are contracted out from the license holder. In China only government organizations have the power to give licenses to start a news group. However, they may not necessarily be experts on the subjects that the paper covers, so they contract others to work for them. The second change is the commercialized subsidiary media within major party organs. Essentially, this means serving two masters—the government and then everything else. For example, originally every city could have one newspaper. This paper was used mostly for propaganda, so smaller papers were started to serve other needs. The third change is joint-venture media, though at the time foreign ownership was not possible. The fourth change is the non-media industry’s investment
in the media. For a long time, companies could only put money into distribution. It was only a few years ago that China opened up to the stock market. Dr. Zhang showed an article from 2007 stating that China had “opened the way for local newspapers, publishing groups, and even government and Communist party news websites to issue shares on domestic and overseas exchanges.”

He then explained the power structure of the government. There is a Department of Publicity at many levels of government, such as state and municipal. At the state level there are also four departments that manage specific aspects of media. These departments use various means to control the information flow through media. For example, the leaders of press groups must be nominated and workers can be relocated if they’ve done something the party does not approve of. Papers can also be censored before and after publication. Censoring before publication is usually seen in the form of training a worker to be politically sensitive or refusing to let something print. Unlike the United States, China does not have an amendment that protects free speech, so journalists need to be certified and content providers for the internet need to be licensed.

To illustrate these points, Dr. Zhang spoke about the Google Incident. He found a notice addressed to the chief editors and managers of press groups listing the regulations they needed to follow during that period. It stated that Google “officially announced its withdrawal from the China market” and called it a “high impact incident.” It had rules such as using content only from the Central Government’s main media website and redirecting to the main media website from news recommendations.

Dr. Zhang stated, “Only when you achieve financial independence can you enjoy more freedom.” As China’s media became financially self-sufficient, they became responsive to the needs of their audience and more commercialized. Media conglomerates arose and currently, they employ almost 4.5 million people and publish over one thousand newspapers. In addition, these changes have allowed journalists to redefine their roles.

At first, journalists were made to be the “mouthpiece of the party.” They were there to create propaganda and they avoided reporting negative news. From the 1980’s through the 1990’s, they had a limited watchdog role, though
they still focused on propaganda. However, today’s journalists have increased their professionalism, or their ability to remain unbiased and fair while reporting. Also, they now do investigative journalism. They’re still regulated by the government and there is a chance of being attacked by those investigated.

There were two stories that Dr. Zhang shared relating to attacks on journalists. The first was about Fang Zhouzi, a man who battles “against pseudoscience and academic misconduct.” This attack happened on August 29th of this year. He was ambushed by two men while on his way home from a teahouse. He had pepper water sprayed into his eyes and he was beaten with hammers. The second story happened a few months ago. Fang Xuanchang, a science and technology editor was also attacked by two men. The men attacked him with steel bars. The article stated that they “behaved like professionals.”

In addition to the threat of being attacked, another negative change is the appearance of market-driven journalism. This means that companies are offering money to journalists to buy publicity. For example, the Zijin Mining Group offered thousands of dollars to journalists for “favorable coverage” during a toxic spill in July. Dr. Zhang stated that “the voice of the weak cannot be heard in the media anymore” and that “journalists are workers and news stories are products.”

In closing, Dr. Zhang explained that the changes in China’s media “are not just changes in journalism practice” but a “change in political philosophy.” He then examined three possible models for China’s future. The Liberal Model has fully commercialized media, minimum government intervention and high professionalism. It would be hard for China to accomplish this because of their long history of strong government intervention. The Southern European Model has media that is not fully commercialized, some government intervention, and professionalism that is not as deeply rooted. The Northern and Central European Model combines the Liberal Model with strong government intervention. This model is the one that seems the most possible.

The East Asia Institute was honored to present Dr. Zhang’s lecture that helped kick of the Fall, 2010 events and the Institute is looking forward to hosting more activities related to East Asia both on and off campus.