

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN CHINA

Eight cases in Chinese watchdog journalism

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Contents

Introduction	1
The Journalism Tradition / By Ying Chan	
1. The Danger of Libel	19
Wu Fang's Search for Justice	
2. Breaking through the Silence	35
The Untold Story of the Henan AIDS Epidemic	
3. The Kingdom of Lies	61
Unmasking the Demons of Charity	
4. Undercover Reporting	73
Ah Wen's Nightmare	
5. The Journalist as Crusader	95
The Beijing Taxi Corruption Case	
6. Media Corruption	109
Cashing in on Silence	
7. Corruption Reporting	127
Mapping Li Zhen's Rise to Power	

8. Disaster Reporting 147

Where Does the Danger Come From?

9. The Origins of Investigative Journalism 165

The Emergence of China's Watchdog Reporting / By Li-Fung Cho

Index 177

3 *The Kingdom of Lies*

Unmasking the Demons of Charity

In the 1990s, as charitable giving grew more common among China's burgeoning middle class, Project Hope, an education assistance program set up through the China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF), became a popular choice. The program offered a ray of hope for poor rural children whose families could not afford basic school fees.

The basic mission of the program, founded in October 1989, was sponsorship. Chinese individuals, companies, and even officials, including Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, sponsored children directly. The project established an account for each child, and transferred donations, which would cover tuition and other basic costs, directly from the foundation to the child's local school. Sponsors would receive photographs of the children along with personal letters of thanks. They could even chart a child's progress through regular reports on their schoolwork.

The system was direct and personal. And who could place a price tag on seeing a child prosper?

By the late 1990s, however, rumors of serious corruption at Project Hope surfaced. Though they did not sufficiently substantiate their claims, Hong Kong's *Next* magazine alleged problems with the foundation's accounts. The China Youth Development Fund launched a libel suit against *Next* in the Hong Kong courts, and on June 21, 2000, Judge Andrew Chung ruled in the foundation's favor, ordering the magazine to pay \$3.5 million HK in damages.¹

“This Is All a Misunderstanding”

During National Day celebrations in early October 2001, a letter arrived at the offices of *Southern Weekend*, a weekly newspaper that for years has been regarded as one of China's most outspoken publications. The newspaper was struggling at that time to preserve its reputation for covering hard-hitting news in the face of sustained pressure from propaganda leaders. Two of its top editors, Jiang Yiping and Qian Gang, had been forced to vacate their posts in January 2000 and June 2001 respectively after sensitive coverage angered party leaders.

The news editor Wu Xiaofeng casually opened the letter, which bore a return address from Keyon, a private company based in Shanghai. As he read through the letter, his eyes lit up. It alleged that Project Hope had deceived Keyon about its

donation to support twenty-four children in Sichuan Province. The letter explained that Keyon had sponsored Project Hope school children as part of a corporate community service initiative. In return for its contribution, the company had received seventeen letters from students, who warmly thanked the company for its generosity.

Moved by the letters, Keyon's chief executive decided to make an unannounced visit to Sichuan over the National Day holiday. He wanted to see for himself what the company's donations had achieved. Much to his surprise, he found that only three of the children on his list had in fact received Project Hope funding, and most denied having ever written thank-you letters. Studying the individual letters more carefully, he found that many of the letters bore identical handwriting.

Wu Xiaofeng assigned two reporters to the story: the first, Xu Liuwen, a veteran *Southern Weekend* reporter and a native of Sichuan Province; the second, Zhai Minglei, a young reporter who had worked for less than a year at *Southern Weekend* but had worked for three years at *Cash* magazine. Xu set straight off for Sichuan to pick up where the Keyon chief executive had left off, while Zhai was given the more mundane task of speaking to Keyon representatives in Shanghai for a full account of their story.

Xu Liuwen spent roughly a week in Sichuan before returning to the office empty-handed. He said that he had spoken at length with the local secretary of the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) in Xuanhan County, and had also paid visits to several local schools. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, he said. Heavy rains unfortunately had prevented his traveling into the mountains to visit the more remote schools.

The county CCYL secretary, Li Xiaodong, presented Xu with deposit receipts for all twenty-four of the students sponsored by Keyon, bearing the signatures of parents, teachers, and local education officials. Project Hope's account books looked clean, said the secretary. Project Hope policy required the foundation to transfer all donations directly to county and district committees of the CCYL. From there, the committees then disbursed them to local education offices, where officials responsible for administering Project Hope could draw funds only with invoices issued by the local CCYL committee. No one in this process could withdraw cash, making misdirection of Hope funds impossible, he said.

Xu Liuwen had also located the author of the fake thank-you letters, Tang Chunxu, the person in charge of political and ideological education in Fengcheng District. He was responsible for disbursement of Project Hope funds to local schools. "I arranged for the writing of the fake letters," Tang told Xu matter-of-factly. "Earlier this year one of the donors came down from Shanghai to see how the money was being used. There were, of course, no problems whatsoever with the money . . . In most cases, it is the teacher in charge of the class who directly withdraws the Project Hope funds, so the students and

parents don't have a clear idea where the money comes from. So when you ask the kids to write letters, they're not so keen on it. Also, the eight-cent postage is a big expense for them."

"So I had the head teacher write letters and pass them on to me. I bought the envelopes, addressed them, sealed and stamped them and sent them out myself. Of course, some of the children had no idea we were writing letters on their behalf, but our intentions were good. It is not what you think — only deception with the best of intentions," he explained.

When Xu Liuwen asked Tang why the office claimed some students attended school when, in fact, they did not, the official said this was to avoid discouraging donors. While Project Hope donations helped pay a portion of school fees, they did not cover all of them. Inevitably, some hard-luck cases could not keep up with their education. When this happened, the office continued to mark the child present in school, and sometimes even provided records of their grades, so as not to make donors feel their money had gone for nothing. Xu had asked Tang if he regretted his actions. "Not at all!" he said. "I only regret not having done a more delicate job of things. Not sending letters wasn't an option, of course. That would have been inconsiderate."

Tang seemed to have a perfectly convincing explanation for every question. Xu Liuwen said he admired the official's candor. "I'm telling you, this is all a misunderstanding," Xu told his editors. "The real reason [for the Project Hope kids not going to school] is regional poverty."

The story might have ended right there. However, Zhai Minglei remained unconvinced. He told editor Wu Xiaofeng that some facts still could not be explained. Why, for example, were some of these children totally unaware of their sponsorship? Even more to the point, where had the money earmarked for these children gone?

If the Keyon executive had given a truthful account, the rumors about mismanagement at Project Hope must have some merit. Zhai Minglei carefully wrote out a list of each point that did not seem to fit. "We should go out there and take another look," he said to Wu.

The story, unfortunately, remained in Xu Liuwen's hands. The case was put on hold while he handled some personal matters. The second Sichuan trip was postponed again and again. After two weeks had passed, Zhai Minglei grew anxious. "Why don't I just go out to Sichuan myself?" he suggested again to Wu Xiaofeng.

This time the editor relented. He was not quite ready to drop a possible story of corruption at one of China's most sacred charitable institutions.

The next day Zhai Minglei went on the road.

When he arrived in Sichuan, Zhai made no attempt to speak with Xuanhan County officials. Instead, he met with Zhou Haolan, a local Sichuan reporter who had expressed interest in working for *Southern Weekend*. Zhou would help orient

Zhai Minglei, with the assignment considered as a kind of informal job interview. They hired motorcycle drivers and traveled straight into the mountains, trying to blend in with the locals by wearing drab trousers, old shirts, and faded blue revolutionary-era caps.

It was not long, though, before Zhai began to feel he had set an impossible task for himself. Sometimes they traveled on the road for more than twelve hours at a stretch, day after day. Schools were often located four or five hours apart, and the landscape was unyieldingly monotonous. Mountain tops rose constantly ahead of them, and at the top of each agonizing climb stood another row of peaks. Rain fell every day, and the roads became mires. Seemingly, landslides and rockslides awaited them around every turn.

By the end of the first day, Zhao Haolan's buttocks were so bruised from riding that he could not lay on his back. Zhai had lost some of the feeling in his legs. They slept in roadside shops or wherever else they could find. In one place, they paid the proprietor five yuan each for their beds, from which he pulled a sleeping villager, and then pointed, "There's your bed."

It was obvious to them that in the two weeks since Xu Liuwen's visit, local education officials had launched a concerted campaign of damage control. In village after muddy village, schoolmasters and teachers kept their mouths clamped shut. Four full days into their trip left them still empty-handed.

The physical hardships could not rival the hopelessness the reporters felt in their hearts. "There is not a shred of real evidence, and suddenly it dawns on you that perhaps you are wrong," Zhai Minglei later reflected. "You think to yourself, 'You doubted a veteran journalist who came up with nothing. Maybe he was right and you're wrong. These people greet you with calm eyes and innocent smiles. Where are the lies that you've come looking for? It is you who are wrong'."

Zhai Minglei became anxious, doubting his instincts. This mood reached its peak in a mountain village so remote local people referred to it as "Outer Mongolia." It was pitch-black there, so dark the stars looked like pinpoints, right above their heads. That day, they had traveled eight agonizing hours.

For the first time in his career, Zhai resigned himself to defeat. He phoned his editor Wu Xiaofeng. "Damn it, Wu Xiaofeng! You're going to kill me for this. But we're at the end of our rope here and we haven't come up with anything."

"You have to find something, no matter how long it takes," came Wu's unsatisfactory answer. "Every *Weekend* reporter faces an impossible assignment once a year. It comes with the territory."

Zhai Minglei's entry in his notebook that night painted a picture of despair hardening into resolve: "When someone has arrived at the absolute threshold of psychic and physical endurance, can they go on? When all hope is gone, can they still go forward? A friend once shared a passage of T. S. Eliot with me. It went:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.²

These words perfectly express the feelings I now have in tackling this assignment. I won't throw up my hands, even though I have passed beyond my own limits. I'll come out of this a new person . . ."

With this, Zhai Minglei found his second wind.

A Bad Pasting Job

At dusk several days later, Zhai Minglei and Zhao Haolan came to the home of a Project Hope recipient, Zhang Qiang. They had crossed four mountain passes that day to reach the small village of Nanping.

As the reporters spoke with the boy's mother, Xiong Shengbi, Zhang Qiang looked on quietly. His big toes poked out where the soles of his shoes had worn down. Xiong insisted they had not received money from Project Hope until just a few days before, on October 31, when the schoolmaster gave them 150 yuan.

The schoolmaster in Nanping, Yuan Shuhong, explained that the executive from Keyon had misunderstood what he told him the month before about never receiving fifty yuan from Project Hope. In fact, he said, the money had been disbursed on time.

"Well then, where did this 150 yuan payment in October come from?" Zhai Minglei asked.

The schoolmaster changed tack. "At the time, I knew that Zhang Qiang's money had gone through. So we advanced the family 150 yuan, 50 yuan for each of three school terms. According to regulations, the Project Hope money and the school waivers are lumped together in one payment," he said. However, the reporters knew this statement was untrue.

"If that's the case, why did you give the 150 yuan to Zhang Qiang's mother and not to the school?" Zhai Minglei asked.

"We realized Zhang's family needed help, and we didn't need the money right then. So we offered the money to give them a leg up," said the schoolmaster.

"You're a school, not a charity organization. Why would you offer assistance to families?"

The schoolmaster paused for a moment and then said, "The 150 yuan payment came from up top," by which he seemed to be referring to the education office.

There was a long silence. The reporters waited.

“It was given to the school,” the schoolmaster elaborated.

The reporters glanced across to one another. The schoolmaster’s story did not add up. They asked to see the school’s account ledgers.

About forty minutes later, the schoolmaster emerged from the schoolhouse across the way with the bookkeeper, carrying a stack of account books. Sure enough, there was an entry for a Project Hope disbursement back in January, almost a year earlier. “Zhang Qiang, 100 yuan,” it recorded in tiny print. On another entry, dated June 10, Zhang Qiang’s mother signed for fifty yuan. This was curious indeed. Had she lied to the reporters, and to the Keyon executive, about not receiving the Project Hope money?

A short time later, Xiong Shengbi herself came over to the school, apparently suspecting something was amiss. She had come over to confront the schoolmaster directly, in front of the reporters, to say that she had not received any money until October 31. The schoolmaster led her outside to talk things over.

At that time, Zhai Minglei noticed that the June 10 entry in the account ledger had just been pasted onto the page. The glue was not even dry yet. A bolt of clarity shot through his head. He turned to the bookkeeper: “This entry has just now been pasted in! Why would you do a thing like that?” Flustered, the bookkeeper could only blurt out, “The schoolmaster told me to do it!”

The game was up. They confronted the schoolmaster, and he finally confessed: “When the executive came from Shanghai we were totally mystified,” he said. “We had no idea the company had made a contribution to the district office [of the Communist Youth League] the September before. We had paid Zhang Qiang’s reductions out of our own pockets for three school terms. Soon after the executive’s visit, Tang Chunxu (the district official who had won over the *Southern Weekend* reporter Xu Liuwen) came from the education office with 150 yuan for me to give to Zhang Qiang’s mother. Tang also knew she was illiterate, so he wanted me to make up fake account slips for all three school terms and have her sign these when she collected the 150. This way, we could paste the entries in and they would bear her signature.”

As for the other accounts, the schoolmaster said, Tang had asked them to lump the Project Hope funds together with the school’s own tuition and fee subsidies. This way, if anyone grew suspicious, they could simply say that they had combined the funds, making it virtually impossible to carry out an audit.

They learned that, after the year 2000, the district education office, at Tang’s bidding, had ended the practice of listing the individual names of Project Hope recipients when settling accounts. Instead, they simply entered the total number of children sponsored. In this fashion, they could shift funds around as they pleased, giving the schoolmasters no way of knowing which of their students were to receive aid. To further complicate efforts to conduct an audit, Tang did away with the practice of disbursing funds for each of the three school terms. Instead, he paid

them in one lump sum, siphoning off a portion to pay whatever money schools owed the district education office. If, for example, new desks had been purchased for a school that year, Tang would ostensibly settle their account by slashing the Project Hope allotment.

Given the huge “debts” owed by many of these poor country schools, this practice effectively voided Project Hope. “Typically, schools owe thousands or tens of thousands of yuan each year. When accounts are handled in this way, some schools have no hope of seeing money from the foundation,” said Yuan, the schoolmaster.

The payment of cash to Zhang Qiang’s mother in October also appeared strange, he said. According to his understanding, Tang should not have been able to withdraw cash. How had he managed to do this? Where had the money been going all along?

That night, fear of the significance of what they had uncovered at first tinged the sweetness of their discovery. The education official, Tang Chunxu, had succeeded in luring schoolmasters and teachers throughout the county into this scheme. How could they be sure they would sleep safely through the night? They considered traveling without stopping, but eventually settled down and slept more soundly than they had for days.

The confession of Nanping’s schoolmaster was the key they needed to throw the case wide open. They worked solidly for the next eleven days, traveling a total of more than 2,000 kilometers, mostly by motorcycle, interviewing more than sixty people. They rested for only one of those days.

Confronting the school children was a painful process, Zhai recalled. They had been coached and coerced into lying about the letters they had written to Project Hope donors. Zhai watched as one child struggled to recall the lies she had been pressed to commit to memory. Moments like this strengthened the reporter’s resolve to overthrow what he called “The Kingdom of Lies.”

The teachers always began with the same story, about how funds had come on time, as promised. When the journalists refuted these claims with their own findings, the teachers would fumble desperately for other explanations. In every case, the parents told a different version from that of the teachers, and different yet again from those given by the bookkeepers.

In some ways, this confusion benefited them. It had taken *Southern Weekend* two full weeks to organize a second trip after Xiu had come back empty-handed, giving local education officials time to orchestrate a widespread cover-up. But while Tang Chunxu had carefully coached schools and gotten them to falsify their account ledgers, the cover-up remained far from watertight, and made a powerful story in its own right.

The determination of the teachers and schoolmasters to hold this fabric of lies together baffled Zhai Minglei. Mainly, an us-versus-them suspicion of the outsider motivated them. Tang Chunxu, however questionable his intent, was still one of

“them”; while the reporters were outsiders, nosing into local business. “Face” was also an important motivation to upholding the deception. As ugly as it seemed, this whole affair was theirs — no good could come from airing it out to the outside world.

Nonetheless, once the reporters had broken through the lies, these fragile loyalties crumbled. Schoolmasters and teachers shared their deepest thoughts and feelings toward Project Hope’s operations.

Having succeeded in building their story, Zhai Minglei and Zhao Haolan turned more attention to examining the conditions in which the local people lived. Although most of this material never made it into the *Southern Weekend* report, the reporters nevertheless believed in its relevance. Poverty in the area was astounding. People slept on blankets blackened with filth, with no electricity when the sun went down, not even oil lamps. Schools were the only symbol of hope, but they were black and cavernous, full of crooked, unbalanced desks, with rough-hewn planks in place of blackboards.

Digging for the Deeper Story

In his article on Project Hope, Zhai Minglei exercised care not to scapegoat the local education official, Tang Chunxu. He wanted, rather, to show how gaping loopholes in the system had allowed abuses at the foundation to develop. Fearful of the political impact the report might have if it directly attacked Project Hope, a nationwide institution, *Southern Weekend’s* editorial committee redirected the story, focusing on Tang’s actions in Xuanhan County.

The portions removed from Zhai Minglei’s original version convey the systemic failure to make the project transparent and accountable:

In interviews with *Southern Weekend* at least four schoolmasters and assistant schoolmasters pointed out that Project Hope had substantial loopholes.

Before 1996 every Project Hope child was assigned an account number. Only when approval came from the local Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) could teachers access the funds. After 1996 this system changed. Funds were transferred directly from the Communist Youth Development Foundation (CYDF) to district education offices, which then distributed money to the schools. This created endless opportunities for abuse. Xuanhan County is Sichuan Province’s model county for Project Hope, and it has repeatedly been given a stamp of approval by the central government and by the provincial committee of the Communist Youth League. Over the last 10 years, the county has reportedly assisted 9,800 children with their school fees, more than any other county in Sichuan. Now problems like these have come to light. But if it had not been for the extraordinary efforts of Keyon and this newspaper in getting to the bottom of the issue, these facts would have been kept in the dark.

One assistant schoolmaster said poor management of the Project Hope funds potentially enabled schoolmasters to have head teachers withdraw the funds. When a child graduated, he said, the school could continue drawing money in the child's name, applying it for the school's general use, giving it to others, or pocketing it. The failure to separate Project Hope funds and general funds from the district education office set the conditions for corruption firmly in place. The disbursing of Project Hope funds to schools from the education office in no way guaranteed they would be used for children. Schoolmasters could apply these in whatever way they wished.

Given the extreme remoteness of this region, misuse of funds by the education office, schoolmasters or head teachers was nearly impossible to detect. Parents have no way of knowing when they can expect Project Hope funds for their children. At least five parents in Xuanhan County had no idea their children were even on the list of Project Hope aid recipients until an executive from the donor company, Keyon, visited Sichuan to see the results of the program.

Three schoolmasters said the Communist Youth Development Foundation should establish accounts for Project Hope children and disburse the aid money directly, allowing access to the money only when the head teacher and the parent are present. After withdrawing the funds, parents could apply these directly to the child's tuition and fees. This, they said, would remove the potential for misapplication of funds and ensure parents did not use the school fees for household expenses.³

Despite the heavy editing of the article at the hands of *Southern Weekend's* editorial committee, Zhai Minglei received hundreds of letters praising the newspaper's coverage of Project Hope. Soon after, China Central Television's (CCTV) *Eastern Horizon*, a news talk show, featured an interview with Xu Yongguang, the leading national official at Project Hope. While Xu acknowledged there had been a few hiccups with the project, he insisted that the Communist Youth Development Foundation was actively exploring nationwide changes in the program. The show also interviewed Zhai Minglei, who spoke about endemic institutional problems at Project Hope. Zhai's portion of the interview was removed before the segment aired. Party officials sought to avoid casting the story as anything other than an isolated case of corruption.

The news of Tang's public admission of guilt that came shortly after the CCTV segment had aired surprised no one. The party committee in Xuanhan County vowed that it would deal harshly with Tang, which seemed to quench the state media's thirst for blood.

But Zhai Minglei's report eventually prompted two whistleblowers, both former employees of the project, to publicly accuse the foundation of general mismanagement, and at the same time implicate the national official Xu Yongguang. The sources were Liu Yang, former deputy head of the accounting department at Project Hope, and Yi Xiao, another former employee. In early 2002, Liu presented

Southern Weekend with evidence that the charity had been defrauded of some 12 million yuan. Based on this new information, the newspaper's editor-in-chief Fang Jinyu wrote a report that clearly implicated Xu Yongguang.

In light of the report's sensitivity, the editors agreed that printing an unedited version would be dangerous. Instead, they explored the option of running it as an "internal reference," or *neican*, where it might draw the attention of China's political elite. According to his own account, Fang offered the story to several internal references, including those of his former employer, Xinhua News Agency. But the article was too hot for anyone to handle.

Having risked their own necks, Fang's sources grew anxious, and wanted to leak information to newspapers in Hong Kong. Fang helped arrange a meeting between Liu Yang and a correspondent for *Ming Pao Daily*. Once *Ming Pao Daily* had broken the story outside China, other media followed suit, including Hong Kong's English-language *South China Morning Post*. Emboldened by international attention, Liu Yang called a press conference in Guangzhou for domestic media. On March 20, 2002, the day of the scheduled news conference, *Southern Weekend* put Fang Jinyu's four-page exposé on the front page, and sent the issue off to the printers. Xu Yongguang, meanwhile, was pulling his own strings. He characterized the allegations circulating in the Hong Kong press as "a terrorist attack on Project Hope," and successfully pressed the Central Propaganda Department to issue a directive banning the story, which the propaganda authorities in Guangdong enforced. It ordered the destruction of *Southern Weekend's* entire print run of roughly 300,000 copies.

Fang Jinyu countered with an incredibly risky maneuver — he decided to post the article on the Internet in its entirety, putting it under his own name instead of that of the newspaper. Within hours, the story spread around the globe. Most damningly, Fang's report revealed that the Communist Youth Development Foundation had changed disbursement procedures in 1996 to enable the diversion of funds by high officials into other speculative ventures more easily.

The *Southern Weekend* reports pulled Project Hope down from its lofty perch. In the year following Zhai Minglei's report, contributions to the fund dropped more than 60 percent.

Postscript

Zhai Minglei called the hostile environment he faced in remote Sichuan Province the "Kingdom of Lies." His story underscores the challenges of reporting in the rough terrain of China's hinterland, where journalists face a range of problems — from underdeveloped infrastructure and entrenched local corruption, to the reticence of the populace.

As insurmountable as these obstacles seemed to Zhai at the time, they only marked the beginning. Once the newspaper had penetrated the "Kingdom of Lies"

in Sichuan, it faced a more daunting hurdle in a system that worked to actively suppress politically dangerous facts. In this case, Xu Yongguang, the powerful official at the head of the China Youth Development Foundation, posed one of the most formidable obstacles.

Ultimately, exposing institutionalized corruption at Project Hope required two acts of desperation on the part of *Southern Weekend* editor Fang Jinyu: the first, the decision to relinquish a major, hard-earned scoop to another media organization — an idea that might seem abhorrent to journalists working in freer environments; the second, the very risky decision to post the full text of the newspaper's second Project Hope report on the Internet. In both cases, cooperation with international media and using the Internet gave him powerful ways to get the full story out.

Through most of the 1990s, the official yearly “white books” on human rights hailed Project Hope as a model and a yardstick of social progress, making it much more than simply a common charity. As such, it provided an extremely sensitive target for watchdog journalism. Government employees and party members were encouraged to contribute as part of their “ideological education.” In 1994, then Premier Li Peng made a point of emphasizing the project's achievements in his Government Work Report to the National People's Congress.

Established just a few months after the crackdown on student demonstrators on Tiananmen Square in 1989, Project Hope boasted explicit political support from China's highest leadership. The project, created under the auspices of the Communist Youth League, exemplified the GONGO, or government-organized nongovernmental organization. Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Li Peng, at that time China's three most powerful men, all wrote ceremonial inscriptions for the project in their personal calligraphic styles. Retired high-ranking cadres from institutions such as the Secretariat of the State Council, the Ministry of Education, and the People's Political Consultative Conference staffed the organization's supervisory ranks.

Given Project Hope's strong political backing, perhaps it comes as no surprise that *Southern Weekend's* editor-in-chief Fang Jinyu could not even publish the second exposé in a classified internal reference. Faced with no other alternative, Fang turned, with great reluctance, to international media and the Internet. “Here I am, a party news worker, meeting with a mainland correspondent [for a foreign publication] and sifting through the evidence against a corrupt mainland official; why must things turn out this way?” he later wrote.

It is important to note in this case that Fang Jinyu did not choose to post his report on the Internet before the international media coverage. To do so might have presented too great a danger, inviting trouble from propaganda authorities. By first leaking the story to Hong Kong media, and drawing international attention to problems at Project Hope, Fang found a way to minimize the risk of punishment for releasing his news report online, notwithstanding the March 21 propaganda

ban. The story then traveled quickly, both domestically and internationally. By March 24, an article on the exposé's suppression at *Southern Weekend* had appeared in the *New York Times*.⁴

The Internet continues to serve as protection and an important network for journalists in China, linking them to a global professional community. This power manifested itself again in January 2006, after the Central Propaganda Department ordered the shutdown of *Freezing Point*, a weekly supplement to *China Youth Daily*. Within hours, the *Freezing Point* editor Li Datong circulated an open letter protesting the action via e-mail and the Internet. He was able to draw attention quickly to the issue, which rapidly became an international incident, prompting party leaders to announce the following month the re-launch of the supplement (although without its two top editors, including Li).

Unfortunately, even when journalists succeeded in breaking through the "Kingdom of Lies," it did not guarantee government action or a change in policy. Xu Yongguang dismissed the allegations in the second Project Hope report as "rumors" and an attempt at "news distortion" by disgruntled former employees. Xu eventually stepped down as the head of Project Hope; he remained, however, on its governing council, and advanced into another leading position in the nonprofit sector, that of vice secretary general of the China Charity Foundation.

Several official audits and investigations targeted Project Hope, but without public disclosure of the findings. The full story remains off-limits to public scrutiny, and to this day it is difficult to establish the facts among the forest of allegations and counter-allegations. According to one well-informed and impartial observer, Liu Yang's original assertions in *Ming Pao* and *Southern Weekend* were "substantially true," but might have resulted from "institutional mismanagement" rather than personal corruption of the project's leadership.

Suppression of the second exposé on the mainland made it impossible to refute or confirm the allegations convincingly. A cloud of doubt remains. But one thing at least is certain — Project Hope has not yet recovered its previous standing in the eyes of the public.

Notes

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Index

- advertising, 5, 50, 92, 123
 - and news extortion, 123
- Agence France-Presse (AFP), 49, 59
- Ah Wen, 4, 15, 73–93
- AIDS, 2–3, 15, 35–39, 41–60
 - activism, 37, 41, 42
 - blood donors and, 2, 35–38, 40–41, 48, 57
 - blood transfusion and, 35, 40, 41, 54
 - China's first domestic case, 36, 39
 - in the countryside, 37, 41, 42, 46, 47, 53
 - drug use and, 38, 39
 - epidemic, 32, 37
 - illegal blood collection, 36, 48
 - prevention of, 42
 - propaganda bans, 47
 - prostitution and, 38, 39
 - statistics about, 53
 - Western coverage of, 37
- All-China Journalist's Association (ACJA), 92–93
- Anhui Province, 13, 160, 162
- anonymous sourcing, 85, 118
- An Qiyuan, 22, 26
- Aro, Pekka, 152
- article payments (see also “*gaofei*”), 106
- atypical pneumonia, 147, 149, 154, 161–162
- authoritarianism, 17, 176
- auxiliary files (see also “*fujian*”), 23, 32

- Bandurski, David, 3, 4
- baogao wenxue* (see also “reportage”), 7
- Becker, Jasper, 37, 58

- Before the Gates of Hell* (book), 144
- Beijing, 4–6, 9, 11, 13, 19, 20, 22, 24, 28,
 - 30, 35–44, 48–49, 52–58, 72, 80,
 - 89, 95–97, 100–107, 109, 116,
 - 119, 120, 128–129, 130–131, 133,
 - 136–138, 142, 144, 148, 150–159,
 - 165, 167, 169, 172–174
- Beijing Friendship Hospital, 39
- taxi industry corruption, 95, 101
- Transportation Bureau, 95, 97, 98, 101, 102

- Beijing News* (newspaper), 11, 55, 58, 60
- Beijing Olympic Games, 54
- Beijing Youth Daily* (newspaper), 32, 33, 151
- blood collection centers, 35, 36, 39, 43, 176
 - export of products, 39
- bloodsheads, 3, 39 (see also “blood collection centers”)
- brick-kiln scandal, 14, 15
- British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 1

- Cable News Network (CNN), 1
- Caijing* (magazine), 4, 6, 9, 12–13, 16, 148–158, 161–162
 - first SARS reports, 148
 - organization of reporting teams, 152
 - story planning, 148, 156, 158
- CBS News (*60 Minutes*), 9, 84, 172
- copyright (see also “control”), 15, 144
- central government, 5, 6, 52–53, 68, 129, 150, 152, 155, 160, 168–170
- central party media, 52, 143
- Central Propaganda Department (Central Publicity Department), 11, 22, 25,

- 47, 55, 56, 57, 70, 72, 83, 104,
105, 141
- Century Weekly* (magazine), 16
- Chai Jing, 84, 86, 87, 124, 125
- Changsha Evening News*, 45
- Changzhou Drug Rehabilitation Center, 73
and Luo Jianwen, 75, 76, 84
- Chen Guidi, 13
- Cheng Weigao, 128, 130–143
- Cheng Yizhong, 11
- China, 1
Center for Disease Control and
Prevention, 152
economic change, 2
Ministry of Health, 36, 38, 46, 52, 155
political system, 130
reform and openness policy, 2
State Administration of Work Safety,
116, 118
Supreme People's Court, 22–24, 26–30
- China Central Television (CCTV), 6, 8–9,
69, 84–85, 87, 90, 151
censorship, and, 68, 87
News Probe, 84, 86, 87, 91, 124
political risk and, 87
Story, 121
- China Economic Times*, 5, 15, 54, 60, 95, 98,
100, 102–105, 107, 173, 176
- China News Service, 46, 58–60, 129, 142,
145, 162
- China Newsweekly*, 24–27, 37, 46–49, 51,
160, 163
“AIDS: The New National Calamity”
(report), 46
Zhang Jingping and Zhang Jie, 46
- China Youth Daily* (newspaper), 3–5, 7–9, 11,
15, 16, 19–20, 22–29, 30, 32–33,
83, 105, 109, 116–122, 124, 161
libel suits and, 25, 26, 27
- China Youth Development Fund, 61
- Chinese Communist Party (CCP), 1–2, 7,
10–11, 86, 92, 127, 129, 165–168
Central Discipline Inspection
Commission, 129, 137, 138, 141
official appointments, 121, 130, 132,
134, 136, 139
- Chinese journalists, 17, 42
anonymous sourcing, 85
bribery or corruption of, 117, 121, 122,
124
calculating political risk, 57, 102, 135,
153
dealing with government sources, 97–
98, 100, 101, 131, 132, 134, 135,
137, 138
disciplinary action against, 47, 55, 56,
57, 104, 106
ethics and, 31, 92, 106, 111, 116, 122,
123
financial challenges, 97, 106, 107, 123
impartiality and, 90, 96, 106
Internet and, 30, 70–72, 130, 134, 160
libel risk and, 19, 25, 31, 103
metaphors for their work, 55, 105, 106,
107
physical hardship, 64, 109
police cooperation or protection, 24, 90,
91
political risk, 54, 106, 141
press law and, 32
professionalism and, 90, 91, 92, 122
protection from authorities by media
and, 44
protection of sources, 81, 136, 141–142
safety, threats against, 88–89, 110, 119,
156
sharing of political risk, 103
strategic choice of publishing dates, 26,
80, 102
- Chinese Journal of Epidemiology*, 35, 36, 56
- Chinese media
commercialization of, 31, 36, 43, 54–
56, 90, 123–124, 161
cooperation with police, 78, 90, 91
credibility and, 123
disadvantages in libel cases, 30, 103
disciplinary action against, 57, 70
ethics and, 31, 122, 123, 124
government information gatherers, role
as, 90
internal protection of sensitive stories,
103
market competition and, 123
political risk, 101–102, 135, 141
professionalism and, 90, 91, 104, 121,
124

- self-censorship and, 153
- self-discipline and, 47, 89
- social justice and, 91, 105–106, 109
- Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), 138, 162, 173
- Chinese University of Politics and Law, 29
- chlamydia, and SARS, 151–153
- Cho, Li-fung, 4, 8, 165
- citizen's rights, 12, 14, 31, 54, 105, 160, 165
- City Notes* (book), 13
- Civil Procedure Law, 29, 30, 32
- commercialization (of the media), 31, 36, 43, 54–56, 90, 123–124, 161
- Communist Youth League, 5, 8–9, 26, 62, 66, 68, 71
- compensation (for journalists), 4, 6
- control, of media, 1–2, 5–6, 10–12, 21, 31, 36, 54–55, 73, 90–92, 123, 160
- coronavirus, and SARS, 151, 153
- corruption, by officials, 4–5, 7–9, 11, 16–17, 31, 39, 46, 61, 63, 69–72, 90, 95, 97, 99, 101, 102–103, 105, 107, 127–145
 - demonization in the news media and, 142–143
- court system, 23, 30
 - announcement of verdicts, 30
 - appeals, 27
 - centralization of, 30
 - closed trial proceedings, 29
 - judicial independence and, 25, 27, 28, 31
 - jurisdiction in libel cases, 22–23, 26
- credibility, of the media, 52, 121, 123
- cross-regional reporting (see also “extra-regional media supervision” and “*yidi jiandu*”), 54
- cyber-networking, 14

- Dabe Daily*, 36, 41–42, 45–46, 51, 56, 58
 - “Aids in Henan” report, 45
- Dangdai* (magazine), 13
- de Burgh, Hugo, 17
- Democracy and Law* (magazine), 31
- Democracy in Zhejiang* (book), 13
- Deng Xiaoping, 6, 8, 39, 61, 71, 92, 172, 174
 - “southern tour,” 6, 39
- Development Research Center, 95, 100
- disaster reporting, 1, 8, 37, 46, 113–114, 116–121, 147, 159, 160, 161
- documents, use of, 4, 8–9, 25, 82, 95–96, 103, 114–115, 119, 135, 139, 154, 155
- Dream of the Red Mansions* (classic novel), 57
- drug rehabilitation centers, 4–6, 71, 73–75, 81–82, 84–85, 87, 90
 - corruption and, 86
 - illegal use of labor, 77
 - physical abuse at, 77, 85
 - sale of women at, 74, 75, 77
- Du Huazu, 45, 48, 50

- Economic Daily* (newspaper), 55, 123
- editorial boards and committees, 68, 73, 80, 89, 103
 - political pressure and, 80
 - ties to leadership, 80
- editorial independence, 13, 16
- editorial writing, 30, 103
- Edong Evening News*, 124
- Eliot, T. S., 65
- entrenchment of local power, 49, 54, 70, 109, 116, 142
- ethics, 4, 31, 92, 106, 111, 116
 - cooperation with police, 78–80, 91
 - protection of sources, 81, 136, 141–142
- extra-regional media supervision, 170, 173, 175
- eyewitness accounts, 96, 110–113, 116, 118–119, 160

- Fan Jingyi (editor), 55, 56
 - “shouldering the door theory,” 56
- Fanzhi County, 114, 117, 120
 - disaster cover-up, 116, 118
- Focus* (CCTV), 8, 91, 168
- Foshan, 147
- freedom of expression, 2
- freedom of speech, 31
- Freezing Point* (*China Youth Daily* supplement), 9, 11, 15, 72, 105, 159
- Frontier Health and Quarantine Law, 148–159, 161

- Fu Hualing (lawyer), 10, 17
fujian (see also “auxiliary files”), 23
 Fu Kexin (lawyer), 25–27
- Gang of Four, 7, 22
gaofei (see also “article payments”), 106
 Gao Yaojie, 37, 42, 46, 48, 50–51, 53–54, 56, 59, 60
 AIDS activism, 42
 harassment by local authorities, 51
 Henan school of Traditional Chinese Medicine, 42
 Jonathan Mann Award, awarding of, 51
 GONGO (government-organized nongovernmental organizations), 71
 government statistics, 38, 152
 Great Leap Forward, 21
 Guangdong Province, 10, 55, 70, 75, 80, 87, 147–153, 157, 161, 170–171
 press bans, 147, 150
Guangming Daily (newspaper), 11, 52–53
 Guangxi Autonomous Region, 131, 151
 Guangzhou, 3, 5–6, 10–11, 16, 39, 70, 73–74, 76–78, 81–85, 87, 89, 97, 147
 Central Military Hospital, 147
 city health officials, 149
 information release legislation, 97
 Intermediate People’s Court, 82
 police, 73
 SARS and, 147–149
 guidance of public opinion (see also “*yulun daoxiang*”), 5, 90, 92, 167–168, 171
 Gui Xien (doctor), 42–43, 48, 50
 Hubei College of Traditional Chinese Medicine and, 42
- Hala, Martin, 3
 He Aifang (pseudonym of AIDS writer), 51, 58
Hebei Daily, 127, 130, 134
 Hebei Province, 55, 60, 127–145
 Li Zhen corruption case, 127–145
 provincial government, 128, 129
 Provincial People’s Congress, 130
 Provincial Tax Bureau, 128
 Heilongjiang Province, 7, 9, 143
- Henan, 2, 3, 35–57, 159, 171
 AIDS epidemic, 2, 35, 37
 AIDS prevention, 42
 AIDS testing, 41
 Dabe Daily (newspaper) and, 36, 45
 entrenched power and, 49
 Health Bureau, 39, 40, 41
 propaganda department bans, 42, 43, 45
 Shangcai County, 52
 Henan Association for Science and Technology, 35
Henan Science and Technology Daily, 35
 hepatitis, 35, 41, 57, 154, 159
 Shanghai epidemic (1988), 154, 159
 heroin addiction, 73, 76
 HIV-AIDS, 3, 35–36, 38–39, 42, 45–48, 50–54, 56, 58–60
 blood transfusion and, 35, 41
 intravenous drug use and, 36
 sex trade and, 36
 Hoffmann-La Roche, 149
 Hong Kong, 2–4, 9–10, 17, 30, 32, 55, 61, 70, 71, 127, 150–151, 155, 157
 media, 55, 61, 70, 71, 127
 Hsiao, William (health expert), 157, 162
Huaxi Dushibao (newspaper), 35
 Hu Jia (activist), 54
 Hu Jintao, 3, 7, 10, 102, 141, 161, 163, 168–169
 “Hu-Wen New Deal,” 10
 media policy speech (2008), 161
 political report (2007), 169
 Hu Shuli (editor), 4, 9–10, 13, 16, 148, 150–153, 155–156, 158
 SARS reporting, 156
- independent media, 2
 information, 4, 9–10, 35, 46–47, 52, 70, 74, 80, 82, 90, 95, 97–98, 100, 116, 131–132, 135, 141, 144, 147, 151–153, 159–161, 163, 170
 public demand for, 153, 160, 166, 169
 information controls, 1, 2, 5, 12, 41, 160, 161
 information release legislation (see also “Government Information Release Ordinance”), 97, 98, 160
 information secrecy, 29, 32, 105, 135, 144, 160

- Inner Mongolia, 15, 155
- Institute of Environmental Health and Engineering, 40
- internal references (see also “*neican*”), 43, 70–71, 80, 90, 121, 135, 139, 144
- International Labor Organization (ILO), 152
- international media, 1, 38, 47, 49, 71, 150, 159
- pressure on Chinese government, 38, 70, 150
- Internet, 12–16, 30, 51, 53, 70–72, 130, 134, 157, 160
- Investigation of China's Peasants (Will the Boat Sink the Water?)*, 13
- investigative journalism (investigative reporting), 3–8, 11, 12–13, 17, 91, 97, 102, 105–107, 121–124, 164–165
- globalization and, 17
- government support for, 4–5, 7–8, 90, 165–167
- under market forces, 17
- watchdog press, role as, 17, 31, 168
- Western journalism and, 17
- investigative reporters, 4–5, 9, 25, 31, 105, 107, 165
- tilling at windmills, 24–25
- Jiang Qing (wife of Mao Zedong), 22
- Jiang Yiping (editor), 61
- Jiang Zemin (party official), 61, 71, 96, 102, 167–169
- Jin Yan (reporter), 132, 135, 138
- Joint Publishing Group, 17, 141
- Journalism and Media Studies Centre (JMSC), 2, 32, 58, 172–173
- Journalist's Day, 121
- Kong Yunxing (Henan official), 45, 48, 50
- Kristoff, Nicholas, 17
- Kuomintang Party (KMT), 20, 21
- land requisition, 55
- Lee, Leo, 7
- Legal Daily*, 35, 57, 91, 122
- libel, 3, 19, 22–23, 25–32, 61, 72, 89, 103, 105
- appeals, 27
- court jurisdiction, 26, 32
- Hong Kong and, 61
- sentencing and damages, 30
- versus the West, 31
- licensing, of reporters, 2, 12
- Li Datong (journalist), 9, 11, 15, 72, 159, 163
- Lifeweek*, 4, 127–145
- first Li Zhen corruption story, 136
- story planning, 132
- Li Honggu (journalist), 4, 9, 16, 128, 131–145
- Li Jianguo (party official), 26
- Liu Binyan (journalist), 7–9, 143
- Liu Chang, 16, 109–124
- dealing with sources, 109–110
- first Shahe disaster story, 117
- story tip, 109
- Liu Quanxi (health official), 39
- Li Xiaoping (CCTV producer), 8, 17
- Li Xueqian (editor), 121
- Li Zhen, 127–145
- early career, 131
- family background, 131, 133
- political connections, 133, 136, 139–140, 143
- local power, entrenchment, 5, 49, 70, 167, 169–170
- Long March, 20
- Lou Yi (reporter), 156, 162
- Lu Yuegang, 3, 9, 11, 15, 19–32, 105
- professional idealism and, 19, 105
- Mao Zedong, 7, 22, 92
- Ma Yunlong (editor), 45, 59
- media commercialization, 54–55, 123
- Meng Xuenong, 155, 158
- resignation of, 155
- migrant workers, 76, 83, 86, 156, 157, 162
- Ming Pao*, 70, 72, 127, 145
- Minjian* (magazine), 15
- monitoring of power, 123
- mouthpieces, 8, 52, 123, 127, 165–169
- Metro Morning Post* (newspaper), 42
- Ming Pao Daily* (newspaper), 70, 72, 145
- mining disasters, 108
- local cover-up, 110
- Ministry of Health, 36, 38, 46, 52, 155

- AIDS news conferences, 52, 53
 AIDS statistics, 52
 Zhang Wenkang, and, 53
- Nanjing, 40, 55, 148
 propaganda office, 55
- National People's Congress, 19, 38, 71, 142, 149, 150, 154, 161
- neibu cankao* or *neican* (see also "internal reference"), 21, 70, 90, 135–137, 139–141, 143–144
 subscription to, 135
- New Express* (newspaper), 82, 83
- news extortion, 122, 123, 124
 regional news bureaus and, 123, 124
- New York Times*, 1, 38, 47–49, 58, 72
- Next* (magazine), 61
- official news release, 122, 127–128, 151
- party line, in propaganda, 6, 161
- party media, 5, 8, 52, 161
 coverage gap with commercial media, 52
- People's Daily*, 10, 20, 33, 52, 55, 59, 123, 143, 155, 158
- Phoenix Television, 30
- police (see also "Public Security Bureau"), 4, 9–10, 15, 23–24, 35, 73, 78–91, 85, 116–120, 127, 135, 171
 suppression of evidence by, 82
- political decentralization, 55
- power, 3, 5–7, 30–31, 166, 167, 169, 170–171
 abuse of, 5, 166, 169
 monitoring of, 31, 167
 regionalization of, 30
 relationships between national and local, 171
- press conferences, 10, 52, 70, 147–149
- press law, and calls for, 32
- Project Hope, 16, 61–72
 fund transfer policies, 62
 mismanagement, 63, 66, 71
 political support for, 71
 regional poverty and, 63
- prostitution, 4, 6, 38, 73, 81–82, 90
 HIV-AIDS and, 38
- public health, 10, 147–148, 154, 157, 159
 rural areas and, 148, 156
 public incidents, 161
 Public Security Bureau (see also "police"), 24, 78, 83, 87
 cooperation with media, 78–80
- Qian Gang (journalist), 10, 17, 61, 172–173, 175
- Qianlong.com, 130
- Qi Lu Weekly* (newspaper), 52
- quarantine, for public health, 148–159, 161
- Red Army, 21
- Reform and Openness, policy, 2, 7
- Ren Wei (judge), 23, 25–26, 28
- reportage (see also "*baogao wenxue*"), 7, 13
- Rosenthal, Elisabeth, 36, 38, 48–50
- Russia, 8, 160
- Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), 3–4, 6, 10–11, 83, 147–162
 disease origins, 151
 economic impact of, 151
 Frontier Health and Quarantine Law and, 154
 information disclosure and, 97, 147, 152, 154
 media uncertainty about, 151, 153
 rumors surrounding, 147, 148, 153
 weak public health system and, 156, 157
- Shaanxi Province, 14, 19–32, 105, 110–112
 governance principles, 21
 Shaanxi Daily, 20
 Supreme People's Court of, 22
- Shangcai County, 36, 38, 40, 42–45, 47
- Shanghai, 3–4, 9, 12, 15, 17, 31, 33, 39–40, 61–62, 66, 96, 144, 149, 154–155, 158–160, 167
 cover-up of hepatitis epidemic, 154
- Shanghai Roche Pharmaceutical, 149
- Shanxi Province, 14–15, 35, 109, 114–122, 134, 137–138, 140, 151, 156–157
 local Xinhua bureau, 119
 mine disaster, 109
 SARS epidemic, 156
 Shahe County, 109, 110
 Shanxi Economic Daily, 122
 Shanxi Legal Daily, 122
 Shanxi Morning News, 122

- Shen Changwen (editor), 56–57
- Shenzhen, 6, 8–9, 39, 55, 147
- Shijiazhuang, 130, 132, 135–136, 139, 141–142
- Sichuan, 1, 9, 15–16, 35, 43, 45, 55–56, 62–63, 68–71, 157, 159–161, 167
 earthquake, 1, 15–16
- Sina.com, 104, 130, 145, 161
- Singapore, 151, 154, 172, 174
- Sixteenth National Congress of the CCP (Sixteenth Party Congress), 3, 6
- sources, 46, 48, 69, 91, 96, 118, 131–132, 134, 136–137, 139, 156
 protection of, 141
 risk and threats against, 24, 70, 141
- South China Morning Post*, 37, 70
- South China tiger scandal, 14–15
- Southern Daily Group, 10–11
- Southern Metropolis Daily* (newspaper), 10
 Cheng Yizhong (editor), 11
 Yu Huafeng (manager), 11
- Southern Weekend*, 3, 48, 50, 106
 AIDS reports, 50
 Project Hope report, 61–72
- Special Economic Zones, 6
- State Council, 5, 7, 95, 100, 154, 156, 162
 Development Research Center, 95
 SARS command center, 156
- Sun Yat-sen University, 16
- Sun Zhigang, 10–11, 17, 83–85, 87
- supervision by public opinion (see also “*yulun jiandu*” and “watchdog journalism”), 4, 8, 31, 33, 54–55, 90–91, 98, 123, 165–167
 as a form of official power, 90, 165–166
 legal supervision, 91
 monitoring of power, 90, 165–166
- surreptitious reporting, 91–93
- syphilis, and blood collection, 35
- Taiwan, 15, 37, 155, 159
 Central News Agency, 37
- Tamiflu, 149–150
- taxi industry, and corruption, 4–5, 9, 15, 95–107
 fare inflation due to corruption, 102
 labor abuses, 4–5, 101
 Premier Zhu Rongji and, 96
 transportation strikes, 96
- Tiananmen crackdown (June Fourth), 6, 8, 71
- Tianya (online forum), 14
- Time* magazine, 30, 37
- tonggao* (see also “official news release”), 151
- Tsinghua University, 28
- undercover reporting, 73–75, 83, 91, 99–100
 cooperation with police, 78–80
 cooperation with sources, 75, 77
 surreptitious recording, 75, 77, 91
 yellow journalism and, 91
- United States, 13, 15, 51
 Internet use versus China, 13
- University of Hong Kong, 2, 10, 151
- U.S. embassy, and early attention to AIDS in China, 36
- Wang Aixia (doctor), 39
- Wang Baojing (party official), 22–24, 26–27, 29, 30, 32
- Wang Boming (publisher), 16
- Wang Dexue (party official), 120
- Wang Farong (party official), 23
- Wang Keqin, 4, 9, 15, 54, 60, 95–107
 financial hardship, 97, 105
 on a journalist’s conscience, 96, 107
 political support, 104
 professional practices, 96
 reporting on problems in the taxi industry, 95
 use of official documents, 95, 96
 work on reform proposals, 104, 107
- Wang Nongye (party official), 20–22
- Wang Shuping (doctor), 35, 40–41, 53
- Wang Weiguo (law professor), 29–30
- Washington Post*, 51, 59, 73, 159
- watchdog journalism, 4, 5, 8, 28, 31–33, 54, 71, 90–91, 98, 104, 123, 165, 171
 commercial competition and, 121
 independence from government, 91
 Westernization and, 17
- web portals, 104, 130
- Wei Jingsheng, 22
- Wei Yongzheng, 12, 17, 33, 176
- Wen Jiabao (party official), 3, 7, 104–105, 152
- Wenlou (AIDS village), 36–37, 42–47, 49–53

- Westernization, and watchdog journalism, 17
 Western journalism, 3, 9, 17, 37
Will the Boat Sink the Water? (book), 13
 World Health Organization (WHO), 150, 157
 World Trade Organization, 11
 Wu Chuntao (author), 13, 17
 Wu Fang, 19–32
- Xi'an, 22–23, 25–29, 32
 Intermediate People's Court, 22, 23
 Municipal People's Court, 21
 Xianyang, 19, 22–24, 26–29
 Xie, Andy, 151, 162
 Xinhua News Agency, 12, 45, 59, 70, 84, 119, 121–125, 127–128, 131, 134–136, 143–144, 151, 161, 172
 monopolization of news coverage, 161
 news releases, 127, 128, 151
xinwen qiaozha (see also “news extortion”), 123
 Xu Hua (AIDS specialist), 36
 Xu Yongguang (party official), 68–72
 resignation of, 72
- Yangcheng Evening News*, 5, 15–16, 73–74, 77–78, 80, 82–83, 86–89, 125
 cooperation with police, 78–80
 libel charges against, 89
 Yan Lieshan (journalist), 30, 80
 Yan Yiming (lawyer), 160
yidi jiandu (see also “cross-regional reporting”), 52, 54, 170–171, 173
 Yin Dakui (party official), 52
 Yixingsai mine, 117, 121
 disaster cover-up, 119
 Yu Huafeng (media manager), 11
yulun daoxiang (see also “guidance of public opinion”), 8, 167–168
yulun jiandu (see also “supervision by public opinion”), 4–5, 8, 11, 31, 33, 90, 165–172, 176
- Zeng Yi (doctor), 36–38, 40–42, 46, 53
 Zhai Minglei, 3, 9, 15, 16, 62–72
 Project Hope report, 68
 Zhang Cheng (law professor), 28
 Zhang Desheng (party official), 21
 Zhang Jicheng, 16, 43, 45–46, 48, 52–57
 first AIDS report, 43
 Zhang Jingping (journalist), 17, 46, 47, 51
 Zhang Sizhi (lawyer), 22
 Zhang Wenkang (party official), 53, 59, 151, 155, 158, 162
 resignation of, 155
 Zhao Shilong, 4–5, 15, 73–92
 interaction with police and prosecutors, 88
 libel suit against, 89
 national journalism award, 89
 threats against, 88–89
 undercover reporting, 75–76
 Zhao Yuezhi, 8, 17
 Zheng Enchong (lawyer), 144
Zhengzhou Evening Post, 42
 Zhou Shuguang (see also “Zola”), 14
 Zhuhai, 39
 Zhu Wenyi (journalist), 132–133, 145
 Zola (blogger), 14