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Cultural Constraints in Digital Adaptation: State Ownership, Agents, and Newspaper Organisations in China

Zhao, Wei

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This study examines the digital adaptation of China's state-owned newspaper firms, with a particular focus on the cultural constraints shaping their organisational capabilities for digital growth. Drawing on theories from organisational studies, media management, and media innovation, it investigates ownership as a key structural factor influencing cultural dynamics, which in turn affects the innovation capabilities of Chinese newspaper firms.

Through a multi-case study of three Beijing-based national industry newspapers, this research identifies three common cultural phenomena: self-identification as state media, symbolic compliance in policy engagement, and the accepted norm of “co-creation” between journalists and advertisers. Despite their shared state ownership, each newspaper firm exhibits distinct organisational cultures shaped by *agent owners*—supervisory entities responsible for exercising ownership rights on behalf of the state. By embedding their own institutional priorities and interests into organisational practices, these agent owners refract the influence of state ownership, generating varied cultural dynamics across Chinese newspaper firms. Building on this, the study further explores the motivations behind Chinese newspaper firms' innovative behaviours, identifying three primary drivers—self-drive, state compliance, and change aversion—that either facilitate or hinder digital adaptation. The interplay of these motives, with state ownership playing a significant role, reveals a misalignment of values, goals, and expectations among policymakers, agent owners, press management, and practitioners. These cultural constraints have been limiting the innovation capabilities of Chinese newspaper firms in their pursuit of digital transformation and genuine engagement with the state-led media convergence strategy.

This study challenges the conventional view of China's state-owned media system by critically uncovering the underexplored yet pivotal role of agent owners. It further advances media innovation research by proposing a novel motivation-based framework to decode organisational cultures and behaviours within Chinese newspaper firms, drawing on valuable empirical data. The findings call for further academic and regulatory inquiry into the power boundaries of agent owners and their conflicts of interest with Chinese newspaper firms, offering insights to mitigate agency loss in China's media governance and address the institutional constraints on media innovation.

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List of Abbreviations

CCP: The Chinese Communist Party

CEAMG: China Energy and Automobile Media Group Ltd.

CEMG: China Energy Media Group Co., Ltd

CEN: China Energy News

CEPN: China Electric Power News

CPTV: China Power Television

NEA: National Energy Administration of China

NPPA: National Press and Publication Administration of China

PD: People's Daily (Press Group)

PRC: People's Republic of China

SASAC: State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of China

SDT: Self-Determination Theory

SGCC: State Grid Corporation of China

SGN: State Grid News

SGTV: State Grid Television

SOE: State Owned Enterprises

YMG: Yingda Media Group

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Author's Declaration

The work presented in this thesis is the original work of Zhao Wei unless stated otherwise in the text. This thesis has been composed by the author and has not been submitted in whole or in part for any other degree. The author carried out this thesis at the University of Glasgow under the supervision of Prof. Gillian Doyle and Prof. Raymond Boyle during the period of October 2021 to November 2024.

1. Introduction

This doctoral research project initially stemmed from the author's curiosity and observations about the digitalisation of the Chinese newspaper industry. It is also informed by multiple understudied issues arising from existing academic and industry discussions, both globally and specifically in China. This chapter aims to provide a concise but essential background review, highlighting gaps in existing knowledge on how cultures within organisations adapt over time to certain structural settings. Specifically, Chapter 1 defines the research scope, outlines research questions and objectives, and lastly introduces the thesis structure.

1.1 A Cultural Lens of Newspaper Digital Adaptability

Since the 1990s, the newspaper industry has experienced over three decades of consistent digital disruption (Balbi and Magaudda, 2018). This disruption has been driven by multiple technological advancements, including the internet, social media applications, streaming platforms, algorithms, big data, and artificial intelligence. As a fundamental principle of economic evolution within the media sector, these technological forces have deconstructed *old* media structures and simultaneously given rise to *new* ones – an empirical manifestation of the “creative destruction” theory posited by the renowned economist Joseph Schumpeter in 1942 (p.83). The advent of digital technologies has brought about profound disruptions in the traditional framework within which incumbent news organisations operate. This shift has presented considerable challenges for newspaper organisations, especially in responding to changes in consumption patterns, declining readership, reduced advertising revenues, and alterations in newsroom values and practices (Adams, 2008; Compton and Benedetti, 2010; Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009; Waschková Císařová, 2024).

The decline of the newspaper industry has emerged as a global phenomenon, with varying circumstances across different regions (Nielsen, 2016). Between 2012 and 2022, the United States (U.S.) newspaper industry's revenue halved from \$34.7 billion to \$18.5 billion, with a compound annual growth rate of -6.1%, indicating a steady decline over the decade (Buckweitz and Noam, 2024). Meanwhile, many Western regions, including Finland, Spain, Germany, and the United Kingdom (UK), have experienced a modest decline (Alexander et al., 2016; Rios-Rodríguez et al., 2023). However, major incumbent newspapers in the UK remain profitable (Brüggemann et al., 2012; Edge, 2019), and Spanish newspaper publishers even witnessed a positive trend in profitability from 2014 onwards (Rios-Rodríguez et al.,

2023). Regarding developing countries, India continues to see growth in print media readership (Kamble et al., 2017; Tripathi et al., 2024).

Despite this varied landscape, describing the newspaper industry as an industry in crisis has become commonplace in both academic and media discourse (Boczkowski et al., 2020; Chyi et al., 2012; Reese, 2020; Siles and Boczkowski, 2012). As an industry that produces the largest volume of original news content and employs the most journalists (Nielsen, 2016), the decline of newspapers has raised concerns about the future of journalism (Pickard, 2020) and risks to “the deliberative quality of public sphere”, potentially leading to “political regression” (Habermas, 2023, p.32). Hence, the sustainability of news organisations has become a fundamental subject of both industrial deliberations and academic discourse. Media scholars called for the social, political, and cultural implications of the decline of newspapers to be a research agenda (Siles and Boczkowski, 2012).

In the realm of media management, previous studies highlight that newspaper organisations commonly follow an isomorphic trajectory (Lehtisaari et al., 2018), implementing incremental innovation (Lowrey, 2011) for economic efficiency (Doyle, 2010; Siles and Boczkowski, 2012). A range of innovative responses have been observed, including online pay models for news (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017; Simon and Graves, 2019), user data monetisation (Myllylahti, 2020), multi-platform strategies (Doyle, 2015), and newsroom digitalisation (Himma and Ivask, 2024; Küng, 2015). However, these attempts often remain rooted in old structures (Doyle, 2013a) and are adopted in an imitative and conservative manner (Villi et al., 2020). Empirical evidence indicates that digital subscriptions remain significantly weak compared to print revenues (Chyi and Ng, 2020), and the effectiveness of these strategies remains uncertain (Dekavalla, 2015; Waschková Císařová, 2024). Thus, scholars call for press management to focus on organisational-level innovations rather than just product additions or technological adoptions (Evens and Van Damme, 2016; Küng, 2013). Furthermore, there is still a lack of a broader perspective to understand the structural constraints on media innovations (Storsul and Krumsvik, 2013; van Moorsel et al., 2012).

One exploratory avenue for understanding this constraining mechanism is arguably the cultural lens. Organisational cultures, defined as the shared basic assumptions held by internal members (Schein, 2010), are observable products of the rules for interacting with existing structures. Newspaper firms, as incumbents, have developed strong cultures from their past success (Bakker, 2013), and the norms and values of press operation are shared across organisational boundaries (Achtenhagen and Raviola, 2009). Like most incumbents,

the strong culture held by newspaper firms has maintained organisational cohesion and process efficiency but has also created constraints and reluctance to adopt new processes and values (Garrison, 2001; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008). For example, the commonly observed cultural clash between digital and print in newsroom digitalisation (Witschge and Nygren, 2009) has highlighted unsolved conflicts between new and old values (Groves and Brown, 2020; Menke et al., 2018; Robotham, 2023). However, media management often overlooks how cultures within organisations adapt over time in practice (Küng, 2008). Although the mentioned studies have identified culture as a constraining element, few have specifically applied a cultural lens to investigate the mechanisms that maintain old cultures or cause cultural conflicts further.

Addressing the research gap regarding the interaction between culture and structural conditions is crucial for media management and policymaking to understand the structural factors that reinforce entrenched cultures and hinder desired changes. The application of organisational culture theory, recognised as valuable yet underdeveloped in media management research (Hollifield et al., 2001a; Mierzejewska, 2011; Napoli, 2016b), offers a promising lens for understanding the innovation dilemma experienced by incumbent newspaper organisations at the micro-level. This thesis aims to deepen existing knowledge on the cultural adaptation of newspaper firms in China, especially regarding its ties to underlying structural conditions (Storsul and Krumsvik, 2013), such as organisational structures, media ownership, regulations and policies. Moreover, this study seeks to address the research gap identified by Siles and Boczkowski (2012) regarding the limited cross-national studies on the global decline of newspapers by offering a China-specific case study. In doing so, it intends to broaden the discourse on the digitalisation of newspaper firms beyond the predominant Western-centric viewpoint to include the unique political, economic, and policy dynamics present in authoritarian regimes like China.

1.2 Tracing the Dilemma of Digital Adaptation in China

The choice of a cultural perspective is not solely inspired by existing literature but also stems from the author's resonant curiosity associated with these concerns based on personal work experience. The author of this thesis was a newspaper practitioner in China for seven years, during which she personally experienced the digital transition of newspaper firms. The author also observed some of the innovative initiatives in Western-based studies, such as multiplatform strategies and experimentation with a "digital-first" approach, in Chinese newspaper firms. In line with the initiatives advocating the importance of changing mindsets

put forth by media professionals globally (Dekavalla, 2015; Huang, 2017; Küng, 2015), the author was particularly curious about the powerful influence of established norms and values held by the press practitioners and managers in shaping their behaviours and attitudes towards digital adaptation in practice. Moreover, the author noted that Chinese press managers often paid little attention to cultural clashes when implementing changes. The discrepancy between desired change and tangible reactions raises questions about how culture plays a part. Existing literature, however, does not provide rich information on the cultural adaptability of Chinese newspaper firms (Huang, 2017; Xiong and Zhang, 2018). The cultural perspective has often been overlooked, not only in Chinese media management practices but also in scholarly discussions.

Furthermore, there is limited discussion on how China's structural aspects have influenced the adaptability of Chinese newspaper firms, particularly when they are confronted with multiple priorities while pursuing digital growth. As highlighted by Storsul and Krumsvik (2013), media policy and regulations can be one critical aspect of structural conditions influencing media innovation practices. Some China-based studies provide valuable findings on innovative practices carried out by Chinese newspaper firms, such as converging media models (Yin and Liu, 2014; Zhang, 2012), diversifying businesses (Li and Zhou, 2021), and sourcing alternative funding (Wang and Sparks, 2019a). However, few studies have analysed China's media innovation practice from a policy and regulation perspective (Duan, 2022; Wang, 2020a; Yin and Liu, 2014). Dynamics in China's media policy and regulatory measures in recent years, such as the publications of "Official Guidance on Promoting the Convergent Development of Traditional Media and New Media" (2014), "Opinions on Accelerating the Development of In-depth Media Convergence" (2020), and "Regulations on the Administration of Internet News Information Services" (2021), have played a crucial role in shaping the policy environment for Chinese newspaper firms' strategies (Chen and Yang, 2015). Yet, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the impacts of these policies on the digital practices of Chinese newspaper firms. Moreover, the effectiveness and implications of China's policy-driven approach to digital adaptation remain understudied.

Prior research on China's digital growth dilemma often explores tensions arising from the dual role played by the Chinese press within its unique media governance system. The particular trajectory of media commercialisation in China since the late 1970s (Sparks, 2010) did not result in the privatisation and independence of press organisations (Zhang, 2010), but in a China-specific media system (Downing, 1996) characterised by "dual-track

management”: commercial departments within news publishers have the financial autonomy to absorb capital, but editorial departments remain under the state control (Zhang and Su, 2020). Consequently, Chinese newspaper firms have long faced the dilemma of balancing commercial and political interests, given their dual role as “propaganda machine” and “commercial enterprise” (Winfield and Peng, 2005). This tension has become increasingly apparent in China’s current media landscape. On the one hand, the Chinese newspaper industry is experiencing commercial pressures due to a decline in readership and advertising revenues since 2013 (Chen, 2021); on the other hand, media control has increasingly tightened under the leadership of Xi Jinping (Brady, 2017; Wang and Sparks, 2019a). The latest regulation, for example, the “Negative List for Market Access” issued in 2021 by China’s National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Commerce, has further limited private capital investment in news media organisations, reinforcing absolute state control over news media organisations (Huang and He, 2021). Given the multi-facet regulatory measures in China tightening the media control in recent years, the impacts of the constrained autonomy on Chinese newspaper firms’ organisational strategies in building digital capabilities deserve further investigation.

Apart from the research gap identified in previous China-based studies, the existing mainstream interpretation of the so-called crisis in the newspaper industry, based on Western settings, is not wholly applicable to the circumstances in China. When examining media reports and academic papers on Chinese newspaper firms online, there are not many discourses that describe the decline of the newspaper industry in China as a crisis. This may imply that the prevailing discussion within the Chinese domain either avoids, overlooks, or does not perceive the newspaper industry in China as being in a state of crisis. However, such speculation underscores the necessity for further research to interrogate the existent situation. Cross-national studies have shown that media professionals’ perceptions of the extent and nature of challenges faced by newspaper firms often differ in various national contexts, even within the Western world (Nielsen, 2016). The situation for Chinese newspaper firms is similarly mixed: while commercial newspapers are experiencing increased financial pressures, party press organisations are consolidating their positions with governmental funding (Wang and Sparks, 2019a). These varied scenarios, both within and outside China’s press sector, indicate the need to broaden the scope of existing empirical research. Consequently, enhancing the diversity of samples is essential to facilitate comparative analysis and to identify common issues.

One approach to diversify the China-based sample is to pay more attention to the long-neglected category of newspaper firms, such as specialised newspapers. Existing research on the digital adaptation of the Chinese newspaper industry predominantly examines regional newspapers, such as metropolitan or provincial-level titles (Huang, 2017; Wang and Sparks, 2019a; Xiong and Zhang, 2018), which cater to mass audiences. In contrast, specialised newspapers have received significantly less scholarly attention. According to the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA, 2023a), by 2021, China had 1,752 newspaper titles, with specialised newspapers accounting for 32.73% of the total circulation, highlighting their significance in the country's newspaper industry.

Specialised newspapers in China, especially those serving segmented industry-specific audiences, merit increased scholarly focus. Research has suggested that mass news publishers can more effectively develop digital reach by narrowing audience segments and providing targeted content (Nelson, 2020). Moving beyond the common emphasis on mass media, such as comprehensive newspapers, examining the experiences of industry newspapers in China can be insightful for understanding the effects of digital disruption on the relationship between segmented audiences and their dedicated news providers. Additionally, the political-economic context in which specialised newspapers operate, along with their organisational cultures and strategic responses, remains largely unexplored within the current field of research.

Lastly, when examining the challenges faced by Chinese newspapers in pursuing digital growth, it is beneficial to consider a temporal perspective. As previously highlighted, studies on the evolution of China's media policies and regulations since the advent of digital media are limited and fragmented. It is, therefore, necessary to trace the recent changes in China's media policies, especially those affecting newspaper firms' strategies to build digital capabilities, to map out the underlying policy intentions. Another temporal aspect is to contextualise the strategic dynamics of Chinese newspaper firms during the particularly influential period of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note that existing studies on the operational status of the Chinese newspaper industry are primarily based on data gathered before the pandemic outbreak. Inspired by research on the impacts of this global crisis on newspapers in the U.S. and Indonesia (Finneman and Thomas, 2022; Finneman et al., 2023; Sammy and Widjaja, 2021), it is also relevant to explore whether the pandemic has acted as a pivotal event, significantly influencing both the commercial and political environment of the Chinese newspaper industry.

1.3 Media Ownership as One Node for Structural Analysis

It must be acknowledged that the research gaps mentioned above are scattered and multi-faceted, making the integration of these gaps into a feasible and valuable research plan vitally important. After careful consideration, the author decided to apply a progressive approach, using organisational culture as a starting point to gather information for exploring the organisational cultures of Chinese newspaper firms (as a surface level) and, ultimately, to discover how structural conditions have resulted in cultural constraints (as an in-depth level). This study views organisational culture theory as an exploratory tool to depict the value systems held by Chinese newspaper professionals, but it places greater emphasis on uncovering the determining causes behind cultural phenomena rather than merely describing them. There is a wealth of evidence demonstrating that organisational culture functions as a variable in organisational performance (Abu-Jarad et al., 2010; Ashkanasy et al., 2000; Barney, 1986; Bass and Avolio, 1994; Brown and Starkey, 1994; Büschgens et al., 2013; Gregory et al., 2009). However, this study adopts the analytical lens proposed by organisational psychologist Edgar H. Schein, viewing culture as a *result* of people's learning through their interaction with structural conditions for problem-solving (Schein, 2010). Based on this framework, this study seeks to locate the structural mechanisms that have shaped these "learning results" to assist in-depth exploration.

The identified research gaps underscore critical facets of the structural mechanisms in China that warrant further investigation, including China's political and economic settings, media policy, and regulations. Notably, these structural dimensions can be linked through a pivotal factor, the ownership system of the Chinese press. Considering media ownership as a primary variable in examining organisational culture formation can effectively connect policy, regulation, and management dimensions to understand their interrelationships. Another compelling reason for selecting this variable is the necessity of discussing media ownership concerning the current topic. Who owns media, implies who has the power of control over it, generating influence on economic, political, and ideological dimensions in society (Doyle, 2002; Freedman, 2008). The owners' willingness, interests, and strategic capabilities undoubtedly play an important role in shaping media organisational priorities, personnel appointments, strategic decisions and even performance (Baker, 2006; Doyle, 2002; Freedman, 2008). When discussing the underlying mechanisms of culture formation in newspaper firms, the role of media ownership cannot be overlooked.

Beyond the pivotal role that ownership plays in connecting multiple structural dimensions and shaping organisational culture, another reason for selecting media ownership as a primary variable to decode the adaptability of organisational cultures within the Chinese press is the limited discussion regarding Chinese media ownership. According to China's media policy, all Chinese newspaper firms are strictly defined as state-owned (Zhang, 2010). Although labelling them uniformly as "state-owned" is not incorrect, simplistically assuming that only "the state" is exercising owner's rights is, in practice, inaccurate. This study provides an in-depth analysis of China's ownership system based on both empirical evidence and policy analysis to demonstrate such an oversimplified categorisation overlooks the actual control mechanism and power distribution designed and deployed by China's authority in actual practice. It is important to note that, in China, the state acts as the nominal owner and delegates ownership rights to various *supervisory bodies* through a principal-agent arrangement, aiming to manage and govern media organisations nationwide efficiently. Although this delegation of authority effectively serves large-scale media governance in China (Zhou, 2022) without sufficient oversight mechanisms, supervisory bodies may misuse this legitimised authority to pursue their own interests beyond those of the newspaper firms.

Several valuable studies have touched upon how media control is delegated to assist in achieving China's governance goals. For instance, Stockmann (2013) discussed how government agencies are required to act as "sponsors" when newspaper companies apply for press licenses, and Tong (2010) revealed the increasing power of local authorities in controlling the local press, challenging the assumption of a centralised control system in China. However, existing studies on media control in China rarely situate these delegated agents within the institutional setting of media ownership. These roles, be they "sponsors" or "supervisory units", illustrate China's practice of delegating control power to these entities, acting as *agents* of the nominal owner of each newspaper firm. However, the actual allocation of media owner rights and the delineation of power boundaries remain largely unexplored in current academic discourse. Therefore, there is a theoretical need for a more explicit and nuanced discussion on the actual arrangements deployed by China's authority, to clarify the actual control mechanisms within the agency arrangements, and to critically analyse how *different* agent bodies play their roles in the operation of each Chinese newspaper organisation.

Highlighting the difference between these agent bodies is crucial not only because of the diverse array of these entities in China, including governmental bodies (at central,

departmental, and local levels), state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and public service institutions (Wong, 2009), that oversee and sponsor their subsidiary newspaper firms, but also because of the varied institutional interests and priorities held by these agent bodies. On the one hand, different entities with diverse perspectives and priorities can contribute to a broader range of sources and viewpoints being represented in the media than would be possible if one single entity monopolised control; on the other hand, various entities may utilise their subsidiary presses to service their own interests, potentially leading to “the marginalisation of national and public interests” (Tong, 2010, p. 939). Although all these entities fall under the authority of the Party-state in China, their different institutional attributes and interests can exert diverse influences on each affiliated newspaper firm. Having received limited attention, this topic provides significant research opportunities to conduct comparative research on the roles and influences of different entities within China’s media ownership framework in the realm of media management. Therefore, as this grounded analysis seeks to show, supervisory bodies play an important role in *refracting* the effect of state ownership in relation to the culture and behaviour of newspaper firms in China.

Following these considerations, it becomes evident that focusing on media ownership as a node for analysing the underlying structural influences on cultural phenomena among Chinese newspaper firms within the context of a digital transition holds great potential to enhance the depth and breadth of research with considerable originality. Media ownership is a politically sensitive topic, especially in China’s authoritarian settings, intertwined with governmental power and control. Chinese scholars have tended to avoid discussing this topic in-depth or critically. While some academic papers published in China briefly mention concerns about China’s delegated arrangement of state ownership over the press (Du, 2014), they often confine their discussion to a superficial level. Additionally, the limited transparency in China’s media policies, governance rules, and media management (Chin, 2011) poses challenges for researchers based outside of China to gather first-hand information for comprehensive research. Therefore, based on the author’s years of practical experience and advantages in accessing data from within China, the current research aims to bridge these gaps by bringing empirical findings on the complexities of China’s media ownership arrangement into a global domain, to facilitate further research in this area.

1.4 Research Questions and Objectives

Integrating the research interests outlined so far, the overarching research question emerges: *How do arrangements for media ownership in China shape the relationship between the*

organisational culture and innovation capabilities of Chinese newspaper firms in the digital transition period? To ensure this doctoral project is more researchable and specific, this broad question has been further specified into three research sub-questions, each aimed at progressively exploring the core themes of organisational culture, media ownership, and innovation capability. Additionally, to address the research gap in knowledge concerning observed variety in how agent bodies exercise owner's rights delegated to them by the state, a comparative question is deployed to help understand the impacts of this variety and enhance the reliability of findings. Therefore, the three research questions are formulated as follows:

- RQ1: What are the shared and differentiated organisational culture phenomena among Chinese newspaper organisations?
- RQ2: How does media ownership play a role in the above-identified shared and differentiated organisational cultures?
- RQ3: To what extent does media ownership act as a source of cultural constraint over attempts to innovate among Chinese newspaper firms?

The first question serves as the starting point to explore cultural dynamics among Chinese newspaper firms, aiming to identify common and distinctive cultural characteristics through a comparative approach. Drawing on the analytical framework developed by Schein (2010), the first question seeks to determine the basic assumptions commonly and differentially held by Chinese newspaper practitioners, especially regarding the changes brought by the rise of digital media. The second question delves further into the role of media ownership in shaping organisational cultures at Chinese newspaper firms. Specifically, this question serves two objectives: one is to decode China's arrangements of delegated ownership, and the other is to investigate how the two bodies (the state and the delegated agents), who exercise the owner's control rights, have shaped basic assumptions among Chinese newspaper firms. This question continues to emphasise the comparison between the influences of different delegated agents on each newspaper's internal culture. The final research question shifts the study towards addressing practical issues by examining which cultural aspects hinder innovation and which promote it, and whether these cultural factors are related to China's state ownership arrangement.

Employing a qualitative inquiry approach, this research uses a multi-case study method (Yin, 2009), selecting three Beijing-based national industry newspaper firms in China. This selection aims to effectively represent both the commonality in shared state ownership and the diversity in the agent owner bodies, thus facilitating comparison and theoretical

generalisation. This selection also contributes to extending the current focus on the neglected category of specialised newspapers. While field observation is recognised for its value in data collection, the author ultimately chose document analysis and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders of three selected newspaper titles due to objective constraints such as budget, time, travel restrictions, and restricted access to the Chinese press since the pandemic. Although it is challenging to capture the entirety of organisational culture, a combination of public documents and interviews remains effective in generating empirical data and facilitating comparative analysis.

Overall, the central objective of this thesis is to make valuable and original contributions to the fields of media management, media policy and media innovation. In terms of timeliness, this thesis updates the current operational conditions of Chinese newspaper firms in the digital era, such as the values and belief systems guiding their sense-making and decision-making processes, as well as their strategic responses and actions for digital adaptation. It also offers a timely analysis of Chinese newspaper firms' reactions to China's recent media policies and regulations. Theoretically, this China-specific study challenges the existing paradigm of China's media ownership research by aiming to deconstruct the assumed singular ownership authority into two separate entities and examine each individually, offering a novel analytical perspective. Furthermore, this thesis seeks a novel framework to understand the cultural constraints on media innovation by investigating the motivational dispositions behind these constraints. From a global perspective, this research also contributes valuable empirical findings from an authoritarian context, aiding future comparisons between authoritarian and democratic regimes regarding press cultures, media policies, media ownership, and media innovations within the global media studies framework.

1.5 Thesis Structure

This thesis is composed of eight chapters in total. Following the introductory Chapter 1, the subsequent Chapter 2 presents a systematic literature review focusing on the core themes: organisational culture, innovation, and ownership. Chapter 2 begins with a review of the theoretical origins and development of these key concepts across various research areas, ranging from management and economics to organisational studies and psychology. It then narrows its focus to the field of media studies, ensuring a targeted review of existing literature on the media sector. Chapter 3 provides a background review of China's media policies, regulations, and the newspaper industry, offering a timely update on China's current

media landscape. Chapter 4 functions as the methodology chapter, justifying the research design, outlining the research process and methods in detail, and addressing potential research limitations.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 serve as the findings chapters, addressing the three main research questions sequentially. Chapter 5 utilises organisational culture theory (Schein, 2010) and highlights three common cultural traits across the case studies (i.e., shared identification with state media, symbolic compliance in policy-driven digital adaptation, and commercial culture of “co-creation” with advertisers) as well as the most distinctive organisational cultures among them (i.e., self-reliant culture, industry-bound culture, and servient culture, each held by the respective cases). Chapter 6 employs agency theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976) to differentiate the roles of the state and supervisory bodies in the ownership systems, and examines their influence on the identified cultural traits. Chapter 7 examines the role of ownership in shaping organisational cultures that impact strategies regarding digital innovation, drawing upon self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2012) to highlight three notable motivational dispositions (i.e., self-drive, state-compliance, and change-averse) behind strategic responses observed in the case studies.

The concluding Chapter 8 summarises significant research findings and offers implications for media policy and media management research. This chapter also includes the author’s reflections on challenges and limitations encountered during the research process, along with suggestions for future research. The thesis appendices lastly provide essential information related to the research content, including the interviewee list, participant information statement and consent form.

2 Literature Review

This chapter examines the existing literature across three key domains relevant to the study's objectives as identified in Chapter 1: organisational culture, innovation, and media ownership. Through a thorough analysis of definitions, theoretical developments, analytical frameworks, and significant discussions in scholarly literature, this chapter aims to not only synthesise existing knowledge but also map out research gaps regarding these key themes. This structured enquiry serves as the knowledge basis informing the subsequent research questions towards the interplay between these elements in the context of Chinese newspaper organisations.

2.1 Positioning Organisational Culture in News Media Studies

This section first reviews both theoretical and methodological discussions on the concept of organisational culture. It then further explores how this concept and related cultural themes have been applied in existing news media studies, aiming to understand what organisational culture is and what it signifies for news media organisations, industries, and society at large.

2.1.1 Understanding Organisational Culture

As noted by Alvesson (2012, p.3), *culture* is a tricky concept since this construct can easily cover everything which also means “consequently nothing”. There is no universal way to clearly define the term culture, as the meaning can vary from contexts with different breadth and depth. Historically, studies around the culture concept were dominated by anthropologists and sociologists (MacQueen, 2020). According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), culture was first defined by English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor as a complex collection that involves “knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor, 1871). Afterwards, descriptive definitions of culture were popular in the literature (Linton, 1936), mainly enumerating aspects of culture's contents (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). For example, Peterson (1979) suggested four elements of cultures: *values* (i.e., judgements on behaviour or goals), *norms* (i.e., both formal and informal rules that are specified by values in social interaction), *beliefs* (i.e., conclusions on how the world works, which serve to justify norms and values), and *symbols* (i.e., expressive objects which represent culture).

Solely describing everything that culture encompasses, however, insufficiently touches upon the deeper level of cultures (MacQueen, 2020). From the evolutionary perspective, scholars also suggested that those cultural elements further can be understood as socially acquired “knowledge” (Lyons, 1990) or shared “products” (Mazari and Derraz, 2016) through a collective learning process. In other words, group members invent, share, and transmit their “knowledge” into fundamental values and assumptions, guiding their behaviours and decision-making even unconsciously (Schein, 2010). And this collective learning process has shaped the culture shared by a group of people.

Since the 1910s, the concept of culture emerged in management studies (Kummerow and Kirby, 2013). The first definition of *organisational culture* was proposed by Canadian organisation psychologist Elliott Jacques as a “customary and traditional way of thinking and doing of things, which is shared to a greater or lesser degree by all its members, and which new members must learn, and at least partially accept, in order to be accepted into service in the firm” (Jacques, 1951, p.251). From the late 1970s, organisational culture became a more known concept through studies by Pettigrew (1979) and Deal and Kennedy (1983). During that time, the success of Japanese companies in global markets over American rivals sparked discussions on the relationship between “soft and irrational factors” and corporate performance (Grey, 2008; Ott, 1989). The popular book, *In Search of Excellence*, by Peters and Waterman (1984), also triggered attention to the role of organisational culture in the success of some American companies in the 1980s. Although the concept of culture is often mentioned in business studies and management discourse (Grey, 2008), organisational culture still fails to achieve consensus in its conceptualisation (Chatman and O'Reilly, 2016). Some scholars viewed organisational culture as a variable that one organisation *has* (Balthazard et al., 2006; Deal and Kennedy, 1983; Peters and Waterman, 1984), but others considered organisational culture as something that one organisation *is* (Garcia-Lorenzo, 2004). Among various definitions, one widely accepted and arguably the most influential definition of organisational culture is from Edgar Schein:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (Schein, 2010, p. 18).

This definition implies that culture is not a static thing, but an evolving system developed through time, based on shared practical experience for external adaptation and internal integration, and maintained by socialisation (Kummerow and Kirby, 2013). Similarly,

Sackmann (2001) defined organisational culture as the “cultural knowledge base” shared by a group of people, guiding the “acceptable perception, thought, feeling and behaviours” of group members. The formation of organisational culture, as Schein (1986) suggested, is based on “both positive reinforcement (repeating what works) and avoidance or anticipation of pain (anxiety).” Specifically, when certain ways of thinking about and perceiving problem-solving repeatedly work, they will turn into a set of rules to help people reduce anxiety towards uncertainty. However, once shared assumptions, values, behaviours, and norms are tightly interconnected, they will grow into “strong cultures” (Kotter, 2008), hardly to be changed. Thus, the formation of organisational culture also implies stability, i.e., cultures can be highly stable over time but also extremely difficult to change once established.

Early research on well-run companies in the 1980s stimulated strong interest in the link between organisational culture and corporate growth (Deal and Kennedy, 1981; Peters and Waterman, 1982). Industrial practitioners also popularly viewed organisational culture as a critical factor impacting corporate financial success (Kotter, 2008). Studies on the link between culture and corporate performance generated a range of approaches to assess organisational cultures. However, existing analytical instruments towards organisational culture varied in their aims, nature, and characteristics (Sarros et al., 2005). Through reviewing seventy instruments for assessing organisational culture, Jung et al. (2009) found most instruments aim at surveying the presence of cultural dimensions in organisations, such as the Organisational Culture Profile (O'Reilly III et al., 1991), while others aim to categorise cultures based on pre-determined cultural types, such as the Competing Values Framework (CVF). According to Cameron and Quinn (2011), CVF involves four major culture types (see Figure 2-1): *Hierarchy*, *Market*, *Clan*, and *Adhocracy*. Rather than capturing the panorama, CVF aims to help practitioners quickly assess their organisational culture (Yu and Wu, 2009).

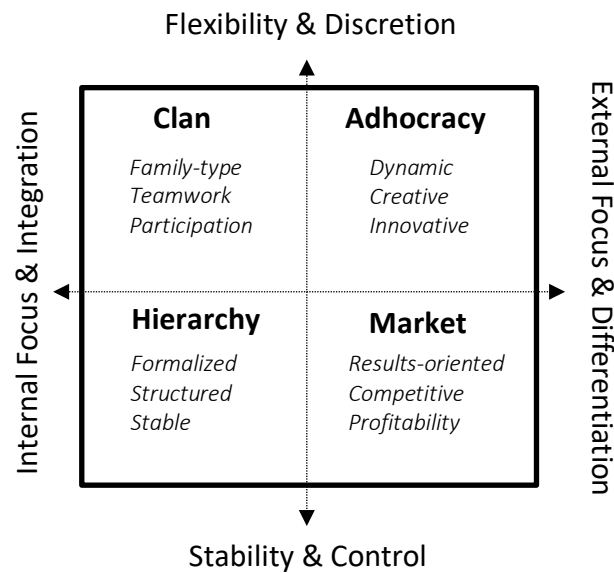


Figure 2-1. Competing Values Framework (Source: Cameron and Quinn, 2011)

Although quantitative survey instruments are considered efficient, economical, and objective (Kummerow and Kirby, 2013), there are still some potential limitations when using quantitative research methods to assess organisational cultures. The first concern is that most survey instruments have not been adequately established regarding their validity and utility (Jung et al., 2009). Furthermore, pre-defined dimensions or types potentially include pre-defined bias from instrument developers. “Stereotyping total cultures into general types,” as Schein (1986, p.31) noted, is misleading since every organisation develops “its own particular pattern of assumptions.” Also, Kummerow and Kirby (2013, p.279) indicated that “powerful pre-existing stereotypes” may encourage practitioners only to identify “confirming instances” but “ignore disconfirming instances.” Thus, survey tools may only assist in discovering partial aspects of organisational culture, leaving underlying aspects, especially the deeper-level cultural beliefs and assumptions, unnoticed (Kummerow and Kirby, 2013; Jung et al., 2009).

For instance, when examining and comparing qualitative and quantitative methods of accessing organisational cultures through empirical research, Yauch and Steudel (2003) noted that the biggest limitation of the survey approach is the failure to understand the reasons behind answers the survey obtained, leaving the deeper level of values and assumptions unexplored. Although qualitative research methods, such as interviews, observations, and focus groups, have limitations in terms of time costs and difficulties in interpretation, they are essential for understanding deeper levels of culture, which cannot be easily explored through other means (Yauch and Steudel, 2003). When deciphering culture layers, Schein (2010, p.28) identified three constituting layers of organisational culture

according to the degree of each level's visibility towards observers or participants (See Figure 2-2).

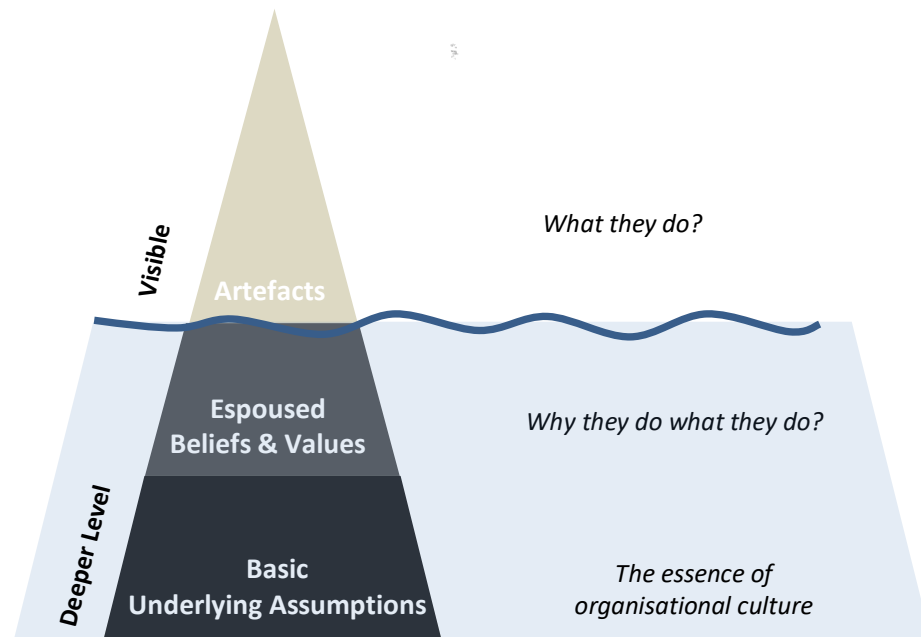


Figure 2-2. An Iceberg Graphic Based on Schein's (2010) Model of Organisational Culture

The surface level, namely *Artefacts*, generally refers to visible cultural products of the organisation, such as organisational structures, published products, stories that illustrate the success or failure of an organisation, language, physical environment, overt behaviour of members, and organisational reward systems (Schein, 2010; Kummerow and Kirby, 2013; Higgins et al., 2006). These cultural artefacts can act as an effective medium to reinforce organisational culture or support cultural change (Higgins et al., 2006; Higgins and McAllaster, 2004). Compared to cultural artefacts, the second layer, *Espoused Beliefs and Values*, however, is more difficult to observe. According to Schein (2010, p.29), beliefs and values refer to the shared sense of “what ought to be” within the organisation, guiding its members on how to deal with problems and how to acceptably behave. Although beliefs and values can be manifested through cultural artefacts, there are also many cases in which one organisation's espoused values and beliefs are not congruent with its expressive artefacts (e.g., marketing and branding discourse) (Kummerow and Kirby, 2013). When observed beliefs and values fail to explain why members behave in certain ways, uncovering the deepest level of organisational culture, *Basic Underlying Assumptions*, held by members, is vitally important (Schein, 2010). Again, if we view organisational culture as a social learning process, basic assumptions can be understood as “taken-for-granted knowledge” shared by group members in decision-making and problem-solving (Schein, 2010, p.30). This kind of

“taken-for-granted knowledge” formed the essence of organisational culture, which is the most difficult to discover (Kummerow and Kirby, 2013).

Drawing on Schein’s model, the development of organisational culture theory presents varied scholarly focuses on different layers of culture. Sathe (1985) proposed three levels of organisational culture, including “organisational behaviour” as the first, “justifications of behaviour”, and “culture” as the third. Trice and Beyer (1993) divided organisational cultures into manifestation (i.e., “form”) and deep levels (i.e., “substance”). However, as Erez and Gati (2004) argued, most theories concentrate on values—the middle level of Schein’s model, which connects the visible or invisible aspects of culture—while fewer theoretical discussions address the bottom layer, i.e., the basic assumptions that underpin organisational culture, largely due to the difficulties in studying these deeper, more abstract elements. Additionally, scholars also argued that although the layer-based model has been applied widely for researching organisational culture, there is still limited knowledge pertaining to the interaction between these layers (Kummerow and Kirby, 2013) and the formation of each layer (Erez and Gati, 2004).

Beyond the layer-based model, there are also other alternative models that contribute to capturing and analysing organisational culture. Martin (1992) proposed a three-perspective-based model to analyse organisational culture, consisting of *Integration Perspective* (unified phenomena within organisations), *Differentiation Perspective* (different subcultures within one organisation based on occupation, department, or gender) and *Fragmentation Perspective* (constant change of cultures). This analytical approach underlines a differentiated lens to culture assessment. However, Kummerow and Kirby (2013, p.81) argued that Schein’s approach is equally capable of accommodating subculture differentiation. Besides, Johnson et al. (2008) developed “the Cultural Web” as an interpretive tool to capture organisational culture, involving six intertwined elements: stories, symbols, power structures, organisational structures, control systems, and rituals and routines. This web-based conceptual model, however, partially overlaps with Schein’s layered approach, as these cultural elements can also be identified as what Schein refers to as *artefacts*. Although the aforementioned models provide varied perspectives for exploring cultures at the organisational level, Kondra and Hurst (2009) argued that organisational culture theories mainly focus on analysing cultural elements *within* organisations, with limited attention to external forces.

In contrast, *Institutional Theory*, which focuses on the dynamic linkages *outside* the organisation, has been argued as an effective theory addressing the weakness of existing organisational culture analysis models regarding external dynamics (Aten et al., 2012; Hatch and Zilber, 2012; Mohr, 2000; Zilber, 2012). As on the critical theory of organisations grounded in sociology (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Powell and DiMaggio, 2012; Scott, 1987), institutional theory seeks to explain how organisations adapt and conform with their broader environments to gain acceptance and legitimacy. Especially regarding the *new* institutional theory, Meyer and Rowan (1977) and Zucker (1977) shifted the focus of institutional analysis to the cultural level, emphasising the taken-for-granted nature of institutions and the role of culture and cognition in understanding organisational behaviours (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). Several scholars explored the similarities and differences between institutional theory and organisational culture theory to explore further integration (Aten et al., 2012; Kondra and Hurst, 2009; Hatch and Zilber, 2012), pointing out that bridging institutional theories and organisational culture theories can help better understand culture dynamics both inside and outside organisations. For instance, drawing on the concept of *institutional pressure* (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), Zilber (2012) suggested that institutional theory can assist the analysis of how different types of institutional pressures—coercive, normative, and mimetic—can shape and influence organisational culture and the interactive mechanism involved in this process. Thus, integrating institutional concepts and frameworks can also be valuable for scholars to understand organisational cultures.

Another essential aspect of understanding organisational culture is identifying its determinants. However, existing studies on this topic are scattered and non-systematic, with the drivers of culture formation and evolution in organisations being diverse and interconnected in complex ways. Drawing on the view of Schein (2010) on culture formation for external adaptations and internal integrations, influential factors that shaped organisational cultures can be categorised into external and internal perspectives (see Table 2-1).

Dimensions	Shaping Factors	Reference Example
External Adaptation	National Environment	House et al. (2004); Johns (2006); Gerhart (2009)
	Industrial Environment	Gordon (1991); Trice and Beyer (1993)
Internal Integration	Founder and Leadership	Schein (2010); George et al. (1999); Shao et al. (2012)
	Human Resources Practice	Somerville (2008); Canessa and Riolo (2003)
	Structures and Systems	Somerville (2008); Janićijević (2013)
	Ownership	Vo and Nguyen (2011); Mottram (2015); Tsui et al. (2006)
	Professional Subculture	Martin (1992); Schein (2010)

Table 2-1. External and Internal Drivers of Organisational Culture Formation and Evolution

From an external perspective, existing studies have demonstrated that both industry and national environment can generate significant impacts on organisational culture. Organisations from the same industry often share cultural similarities across organisations, and these shared characteristics can distinguish these organisations from those in other industries (Gordon, 1991). This is because industry environments, including market demands, societal expectations, industry regulations, and competitive contexts, all affect cultural values and assumptions held by industry practitioners (Trice and Beyer, 1993). Despite sharing common cultures within one industry, each organisation's culture still develops differently, due to the differences in how leaders and members filter and interpret their external environments (Reino et al., 2007). Beyond the industry level, some empirical research demonstrated a strong correlation between national culture and organisational culture (Johns, 2006; House et al., 2004), while others argued that the influence of national factors is not that strong (Gerhart, 2009). Fewer studies have explored external factors shaping organisational culture compared to internal ones. Furthermore, policies and regulations, for instance, which are arguably one critical external aspect, have also received little attention.

Internally, the driving forces of organisational culture identified in existing literature can be categorised into five broad groups. The first widely recognised factor influencing culture creation and evolution is the founder and leadership. Based on case studies of *Apple*, *Microsoft* and *Amazon*, Schein (2010, p.105) explained how founders shaped culture creation: generally, entrepreneurs aim to create changes, and these changes are based on their own values, assumptions and beliefs; once “changes produce success for a group, and the leader's vision and values are adopted, a culture evolves and survives.” Additionally, methods imposed by founders to achieve organisational goals, such as organisational structures, systems, strategies, and technologies, also form cultural assumptions and further drive organisational culture. According to leadership studies, leadership plays a critical role in establishing and communicating organisational visions (George et al., 1999) and

promoting desired organisational culture (Shao et al., 2012). The behaviours of leaders, such as reactions to organisational crises and criteria for promotion and recruitment, also may shape organisational culture (Schein, 2010).

In addition to the founder and leadership aspect, other organisational factors can drive organisational culture formation. Human resource practices, such as changes in recruitment, rewarding systems, organisational training, and organisational communication, have been explored and demonstrated as driving forces of organisational cultures (Canessa and Riolo, 2003; Somerville, 2008). Additionally, organisational structures (Janićijević, 2013) and processes (Saffold, 1988) can also significantly drive changes in organisational cultures (Somerville, 2008). Furthermore, ownership, a key element of the current research, has been highlighted by scholars as a crucial factor in shaping organisational culture, although discussions on this aspect are still limited (Mottram, 2015; Vo and Nguyen, 2011; Zeng and Luo, 2013). Several studies on Chinese organisations have demonstrated that different ownership types, such as state-owned, private domestic and foreign-invested, can significantly shape differentiated organisational cultures (Tsui et al., 2006; Zeng and Luo, 2013). The last internal factor, subcultures within organisations, have also been highlighted by organisation studies as one influential aspect that can strengthen, disrupt (Boisnier and Chatman, 2014) and weaken (Martin, 1992) organisational cultures.

Although studies have explored the formation of organisational culture associated with both external and internal factors, the answers to whether culture can be managed remain controversial in academia (De Witte and Van Muijen, 1999). Even if it is unmanageable, these driving factors still can be treated as potential channels for cultural change. This section regarding organisational culture theory illustrates the complexity of capturing cultural phenomena due to its multifaceted nature and evolvability and diversity in analytical models and approaches. The next section specifically reviews how the cultural perspective has been explored in news media organisations.

2.1.2 Cultures in News Media Organisations

Culture is one of the most potent forces in organisations as it shapes group behaviours, decision-making, priority setting, and organisational outcomes (Schein, 1996). Media organisations are no exception. Media organisations are defined by Shoemaker and Reese (1996) as “social, formal, usually economic” entities that “employ the media worker in order

to produce media content.” An updated definition of media organisations is from the Recommendation CM/REC (2011)⁷ by the Council of Europe:

“... all actors involved in the production and dissemination, to potentially large numbers of people, of content (for example information, analysis, comment, opinion, education, culture, art and entertainment in text, audio, visual, audiovisual or other form) and applications which are designed to facilitate interactive mass communication (for example social networks) or other content-based large-scale interactive experiences (for example online games), while retaining (in all these cases) editorial control or oversight of the contents” (2011, p.2)

Drawing on these definitions, news media organisations can be defined as entities that collect, produce, and distribute news content to large audiences across multiple media formats and platforms, guided by their editorial policies and control. One key characteristic of news media organisations is their operation within a dual-product marketplace (Picard, 1989): they produce news media content consumed by audiences, and in return, audiences are sold as commodities to advertisers to generate revenues (Doyle, 2013b; Napoli, 2016a). Additionally, news media organisations differ from conventional enterprises in that they not only pursue financial gains but also serve the public interest, which differentiates them from conventional enterprises (Nielsen, 2017; Silberblatt, 2004; Westlund and Ekström, 2019). The role of news media organisations in serving public interests is significantly intertwined with one of the cultural aspects of news media: *journalism cultures*. As Hanitzsch (2007) defined, journalism culture is:

“a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously and unconsciously, legitimate their roles in society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others” (p.369).

Existing literature on cultures involved in journalistic practice presents rather scattered conceptual arrays, such as journalistic cultures (Gade and Lowrey, 2011; Hanitzsch et al., 2019), journalistic identity (Bogaerts, 2011; Hanitzsch, 2017), newsroom cultures (Hollifield et al., 2001b; Menke et al., 2018; North, 2009; Wilke, 2003), and professional cultures (Li and Chitty, 2021; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Stalph, 2020). By reviewing the literature on journalism culture, Hanitzsch (2007) developed “institutional roles”, “epistemologies”, and “ethical ideologies” as key components of journalism culture, and outlined “interventionism”, “power distance”, “market orientation”, “objectivism”, “empiricism”, “relativism”, and “idealism” as its main principles. It is widely recognised that journalism culture shares strong cultures across national and organisational boundaries (Hanitzsch, 2006; Hollifield, 2001; Hollifield et al., 2001b; Reese, 2001; Zhu et al., 1997).

Thus, the interaction between journalism culture as subcultures and organisational cultures has become one common research interest in journalism studies (Hollifield et al., 2001a).

According to organisational culture theory, integrated cultures and differentiated subcultures (e.g., professional cultures) often co-exist within organisations (Hofstede, 1998; Martin, 1992; Schein, 2010). While some subcultures can apply organisation-wide, others may conflict with primary organisational cultures (Khatib, 1996). News workers, such as journalists and editors, often identify themselves as a distinct group within news organisations and share journalistic skills, norms, values and assumptions that are unique to their group (Van Maanen and Barley, 1985). The conflict between professional culture and organisational goals has been found in a range of studies on news organisations (Achtenhagen and Raviola, 2009; Raviola, 2012; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Sigelman, 1973). For instance, some scholars examined how the intensified need for commercial operations within newspaper organisations, driven by digital disruptions, is exerting increased pressure on journalistic values like autonomy (Witschge and Nygren, 2009). Others focused on how changes in routines and norms resulting from media convergence in news outlets are challenging deeply rooted journalism cultures (Achtenhagen and Raviola, 2009).

However, the cultural dynamics encompassing the entire media organisation remain understudied. Media scholars have acknowledged this research gap. Mierzejewska (2011) and Hollifield et al. (2001b) noted that the application of organisational culture theory in media management research is relatively new with few media-specific studies grounded in organisational culture theories. Early adoption of organisational culture in media management studies can be seen in the study by Küng (2000) on the linkage between organisational culture and strategic planning through interviewing members from two national broadcasting companies, BBC and CNN. Although this study is not grounded in newspaper organisations, it offers a promising approach for deciphering organisational culture within news outlets based on Schein's conceptualisation and provides a primary explanation for the interaction between culture, motivation, and strategy-making in media-specific contexts. Notably, with the urgent need for digital adaptation, research interests in organisational culture in news media transformation are growing due to the increasing recognition of the significant role of cultures in constraining media innovation (Krumsvik et al., 2019; Müller et al., 2019; Villi and Picard, 2019).

As mentioned in the previous section, the link between organisational culture and business performance has been a popular research area, but only a few media studies have examined this connection. For instance, Van der Wurff and Leenders (2008) surveyed media organisational cultures and adopted partial correlation analysis to examine categorised dimensions of media organisational cultures and performance. One limitation of this study, however, is that the survey respondents were all former graduates of the same university with the same major, which raises a question about the validity of the findings. Another significant study that explored the link between organisational culture and innovation is from the multi-case study by Küng (2015) regarding the reasons behind the success of several well-performed news organisations in digital innovation. Although not primarily focused on organisational culture, the case study on *The Guardian* highlighted its critical role, demonstrated alignment between cultural value and the digital ecosystem reduced cultural resistance and fostered the shared “digital mindset” (Küng, 2015, pp.9-26). However, most newspaper firms do not have the culture that *The Guardian* has. How to cope with the interaction between organisational culture and media innovation still requires further research.

In their recently published book, *Transforming newsrooms: connecting organisational culture, strategy, and innovation*, Malmelin et al. (2021) specifically applied organisational culture as “the foundation of change” to help understand the cultural constraints involved in newsroom transformations. Based on observations at newsrooms, Malmelin et al. (2021, p.39) found that many news workers still hold their underlying assumptions about “the prestige of print” rather than prioritising “digital”, even though interviewees admitted the importance of digital innovation. Such a disconnection between “what people say” and “what they act” is a common phenomenon in organisation studies (Kummerow and Kirby, 2013). Although this book focuses on newsroom cultures, it still offers practical insights on the methodology and theoretical underpinning combined with Schein’s approach, for current research. This book also highlights the importance of mapping out the underlying assumptions instead of solely relying on what members appear to say or choose in surveys.

Based on this section’s review of organisational culture theory and its application to news media studies, Schein’s layered conceptual model provides a solid foundation to explore cultures within newspaper organisations. Incorporating an institutional approach that includes external forces such as policies and regulations can enhance our understanding of cultural dynamics both inside and outside these news organisations. Notably, existing studies have primarily focused on journalism cultures or their interaction with organisational

practices, rather than specifically the organisation-level cultures. The application of cultural analysis to news media organisations remains limited, restricting our understanding of the cultural dynamics of legacy media organisations in the digital age and the strategies needed to address these challenges. The next section will further explore the concept of innovation, to understand the connection between culture and innovation.

2.2 Media Innovation and Cultural Change

This section reviews both innovation studies and the way media scholars have explored this concept theoretically and empirically. Additionally, it examines the challenges faced by news media organisations, particularly newspaper firms, as highlighted in existing literature, to understand how organisational cultures at news publishers have evolved in their pursuit of innovation.

2.2.1 Innovation Theory in Media Studies

Some studies suggested the concept of innovation was borrowed from the Latin word *innovare* (meaning “into new”) (Stenberg, 2017; Vadrot, 2011). However, Godin (2015, p.19) highlights that innovation originated from the Greek word *kainotomia* (meaning “making new”) from the fifth century BCE. Different from how we understand this term today, innovation used to be a pejorative expression in its semantic history, referring to deviations from the established order (Godin, 2015). It was not until the twentieth century that innovation became widely recognised as a positive instrument for technological, economic, and social progress (Damanpour, 2020; Godin, 2008). The famous economist Joseph Schumpeter proposed one early definition of innovation, referring to novel combinations of any new ideas, commodities, methods, sources, markets, or forms of organisations (Schumpeter, 1939; 1983). Further, Peter Drucker, the leading founder of modern management, also defined innovation as a tool to create purposeful and focused change in an enterprise’s economic or social potential (Drucker, 1985).

While Schumpeter and Drucker’s economically based views centred on the *generation* of innovation, sociologists and anthropologists typically adopt a sociocultural approach, emphasising the *adoption* and *diffusion* of innovation (Damanpour, 2020; Godin, 2016). For instance, Homer Barnett (1953) and Everett Rogers (2010) defined innovation as any idea, behaviour, and practice that is perceived as *new* by the adopting entity as it is *different* from existing forms. In this regard, in addition to creators and primary generators of new ideas, products, and practices, adopters and imitators can also be viewed as innovators since they

are both adopting “something new” to themselves (Damanpour, 2020; Godin, 2016). In contrast, some theorists excluded imitation from the scope of the innovation concept (Levitt, 1966). However, most innovative strategies carried out by organisations are imitation-oriented (Ciałowicz and Malawski, 2017): not plagiarising or duplicating but imitatively adopting something new to facilitate independent problem-solving (Winter and Nelson, 1982; Zhou, 2006), also known as “secondary innovation” (Hu, 2018). Primary innovators and market pioneers are scarce (Zhou, 2006), and imitators and later entrants are more prevalent since imitative innovation can also bring them competitive advantages (Shankar et al., 1999) with lower costs (Naranjo-Valencia et al., 2011). Nevertheless, imitation strategies still received little attention from innovation theorists (Schnaars, 2002).

Another similar concept, change, was often used as one synonym for innovation by researchers. Although both innovation and change have strategic ends for improving competitive advantage at the organisational level, change is a broader construct that covers the concept of innovation. As illustrated in Figure 2-3, innovation can be viewed as a driver (Damanpour, 2020) and an agent of change (Bresciani et al., 2013). However, it is important to note that not all changes are innovation-oriented within organisations. As argued by Huber et al. (1993), the essence of change is not necessarily about novelty but about differences, which is often reflected in various aspects such as organisational operations, leadership, structural forms, and resource allocation. In contrast, organisational innovation primarily emphasises the introduction and adoption of “value-added novelty”, such as new management systems or the renewal and enlargement of products, services, and markets (Crossan and Apaydin, 2010, p.1155).

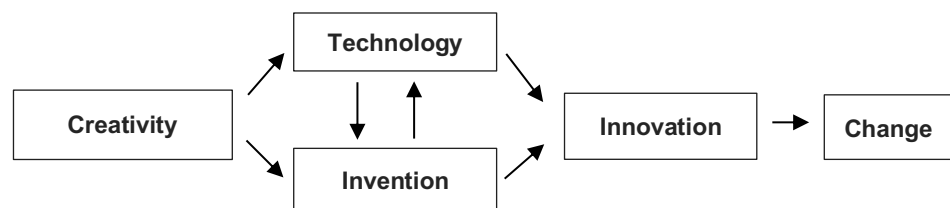


Figure 2-3. A Relation Diagram for Innovation Concepts (Source: Damanpour, 2020)

Indeed, innovation is a multi-discursive concept: overlapping multiple similar and relevant concepts and having different connotations within different disciplinary discourses (Murschetz, 2014). Innovation theorists have probed this concept through differential perspectives (e.g., outcome-oriented or process-oriented) (Van De Ven and Rogers, 1988) at different levels (e.g., individual, organisational, industrial, or national) (Damanpour, 2020). Furthermore, the theoretical construction of innovation in literature also presents

diverse typologies, from its nature (e.g., product, process, technological, or managerial) (Damanpour and Evan, 1984), the degree of novelty (e.g., radical, disruptive, or incremental) (Ettlie et al., 1984), to the extent of openness (e.g., in-house/organic or non-organic) (Gopalakrishnan and Damanpour, 1997). However, the concept of innovation has been used loosely in literature (Crossan and Apaydin, 2010). Thus, it is important to locate this concept with a specific focus on the media sector to explore how innovations have been conceptualised by media economics and media management studies.

Despite the strong interest of academia in innovative activities carried out in the media industry (Mierzejewska and Hollifield, 2006), many agree the concept of innovation in media economics and management studies remains poorly understood (Bleyen et al., 2014; Dogruel, 2015; Küng, 2008). One primary reason is associated with the distinct characteristics of media products, resulting in difficulties in directly transferring innovation theories in the research field of media (Mierzejewska and Hollifield, 2006). Fundamentally, the essence of a media product is “a combination of content tied to a physical carrier” (Habann, 2008), and the value of content largely depends on its immaterial aspects, such as the quality of the message and meanings it conveys (Doyle, 2013b). Thus, unlike general commodities targeting innovations in functional performance, media products often seek aesthetic, intellectual, social, educational, informational, and recreational renewal (Bakhshi et al., 2008). Although “routinely produced new content” is not considered media innovation (Dogruel, 2014, p.56), content-related innovation often presents a rather close interaction between intangible (e.g., creativity) and tangible aspects of products (e.g., technology) (Dogruel, 2014; Habann, 2008; Handke, 2008; Schweizer, 2003). Stoneman’s (2010) notion of “soft innovation” for creative industries helps fill the gap in defining content-related innovations that “primarily impact aesthetic or intellectual appeal”.

Based on the review above, media innovation can be understood as the process of introducing and integrating new intangible and tangible values into existing media products and services or organisational practices, with the goal of both enhancing economic performance and addressing public needs. Existing studies on media innovation have sought to categorise innovations within the media sector. According to different initiative targets, media innovation can be classified into four “P”s - product, process, position, and paradigm innovation - and one “S”, which stands for social innovation (Francis and Bessant, 2005; Storsul and Krumsvik, 2013). By reviewing studies from 1990 to 2018 on digital news innovation, Belair-Gagnon and Steinke (2020) categorised ten innovation types: profit model, network, structure, process, product performance, branding, channel, product system,

service, and audience engagement. Besides, K ng (2013) elaborated on a typology of media innovation based on the degree of change each may drive, including incremental, architectural, discontinuous, and disruptive innovation. In the context of newspaper innovations, some scholars have considered online products launched by newspaper firms as radical and unsystematic (Adams, 2008). However, most innovative practices of newspaper firms have been identified as incremental (Gade and Lowrey, 2011; Lehtisaari et al., 2018; Lowrey, 2011) and imitation-oriented, based on existing models (Doyle, 2013a; K ng, 2013; Lehtisaari et al., 2018; Lowrey, 2011).

Understanding innovations also requires mapping out the factors that can drive and shape innovations at the organisational level. In this context, Crossan and Aladdin (2010) and Damanpour (2020) reviewed and summarised key determinants of organisational innovation, categorising them into external (e.g., environmental influences), internal (e.g., organisational factors), and individual/group dimensions (e.g., leadership and employees). In the field of media innovation research, Storsul and Krumsvik (2013), Krumsvik et al. (2013) and Lowrey (2011) reviewed and explored major determinants of media innovation. Table 2-2 compares all the determinates identified in reviews conducted by both the above-mentioned innovation scholars and media innovation researchers, highlighting factors that have not been specifically explored in the existing literature on media innovation studies. Although this section will not further conduct a systematic review of all these determinants, it clearly lists a range of influential aspects that should be carefully considered when examining the factors shaping the innovative capabilities of newspaper firms.

Dimensions	Determinants of Innovations	Identified By Media Innovation Studies
Environmental Dimension	Industry Norms	Industry Norms
	Customers/Users	Customers/Users
	Technology	Technologies
	Competitors	Competitors
	Market Dynamics	Market Dynamics
	Regulations and policies	Regulations and policies
	Social Contexts	
	National Environment	
	Global Environment	
	Legal	
Organisational Dimension	Strategy	Strategy
	Visions	Visions
	Resource	Resource
	Size	Size
	Organisational Culture	Organisational Culture
	Ownership	Ownership
	Structure	Structure
	Knowledge	
	Business Process	
	Organisational Learning	
	System	
Individual/Group Dimension	Leadership	Leadership
	Professional Culture	Professional Culture
	Creativity	Creativity
	Motivation	
	Management teams	
	Non-management Teams	
References	Crossan and Apaydin (2010); Damanpour (2020)	Krumsvik et al. (2013); Lowrey (2011)

Table 2-2. Main Determinants Identified by Innovation Studies and Media Innovation Studies

When examining the innovative capabilities of media firms, the concept of *Dynamic Capabilities*, originating from strategic management studies and introduced by Teece et al. (1997), provides a valuable framework for understanding “the firm’s ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments” (p.516). As an extension of the *Resource-Based View* Theory (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000), dynamic capabilities emphasise an organisation’s ability to develop and renew resources in response to unstable environments over time, a concept that particularly suits for researching media firms in the current turbulent media sector (Murschetz et al., 2020). Three key activities involved in creating dynamic capabilities, namely *sensing*, *seizing*, and *transforming* (Teece, 2023; 2014), have been utilised by media management

scholars to examine legacy media firms' digital capabilities (Ellonen et al., 2009; Ellonen et al., 2011; Jantunen et al., 2012). Dynamic capabilities framework also assists media management scholars in examining and comparing the strategic behaviours of media firms in tangible and intangible resource management and its relatedness to firm performance (Oliver, 2014; 2017; 2018). Although the appliance of dynamic capabilities in media management studies has been growing since 2003, the potential of dynamic capabilities to assist policy adjustments (Teece, 2023), support media industry and even cross-nation analyses, and help media managers rebuild digital competitiveness remains underexplored (Murschetz et al., 2020).

Theoretically, the concept of dynamic capabilities is more suited for examining organisational adaptation to turbulent environments rather than relatively stable and moderate external changes. However, Teece's (2014; 2023) disentangling of key strategic activities, namely sensing, seizing, and transforming, offers a valuable evaluative tool for comparing and analysing the adaptive capabilities among media organisations. Not all media organisations operate in highly turbulent free markets in the digital age, but their ability to sense market and policy dynamics, seize opportunities, and make strategic adjustments to external changes remains a key reflection of their organisational capabilities for digital adaptation and innovation. In addition to valuing the creation of new resources, the concept of dynamic capabilities further emphasises the organisational capability to reconfigure existing resources in a timely manner. This is particularly valuable for evaluating media organisations' capabilities for digital transformation, especially when addressing the challenges involved in initiating and implementing changes to established resources and processes.

Although there has been a range of media-specific studies touched upon themes of innovation or change, the exploration of these concepts within the field of media economics and management research remains fragmented and unsystematic (Mierzejewska and Hollifield, 2006). Media innovation is a broad and multi-faceted construct (Murschetz, 2014) that notably lacks theoretical underpinnings and integrated analytical approaches (Dogruel, 2015). Furthermore, most studies on media innovations often focus on single innovation actors rather than adopting a more holistic and integrated approach to consider a broader context inside and outside organisations (Westlund and Lewis, 2014). The next section reviews innovation practices within newspaper organisations captured by existing studies.

2.2.2 Innovations in Newspapers

Like most other media, newspapers participate in a dual-product market (Picard, 1989) to gain revenues by combining circulation and advertising to fulfil economic and social functions (Doyle, 2013b). From a social-based perspective, compared with other media, newspapers usually have greater impacts on social and political expression, and they are more information-oriented rather than entertainment-oriented (Picard, 2003). From an economic perspective, the newspaper industry has been advantageous in profitability compared to other media industries for a long time in its history (Soloski, 2013). However, since the emergence of digital technologies, the newspaper industry in certain countries has experienced dramatic drops in revenues and readership. The decline of newspapers is not a new phenomenon, but the impact brought by digital news platforms is significantly greater than that of other media challengers they have ever met (e.g., television) (Dekavalla, 2015).

As mentioned previously, “the newspaper crisis” is not uncommon in academia and media discourse. However, by analysing American media coverage of “the newspaper crisis”, Chyi et al. (2012) argued that news reports exaggerated the decline of newspapers without proper consideration of contexts, leading to “a false impression” of “death” towards audiences. Undoubtedly, a large number of studies based in Western Europe and the U.S. have indicated how the newspaper industry has experienced disruptive changes in recent years (Cawley, 2017; Collis et al., 2009; Dekavalla, 2015; Soloski, 2013). However, many newspapers still run well in small markets in the U.S. (Chyi et al., 2012). In Germany, newspapers maintained a strong economic position (Brüggemann et al., 2012). Several developing countries are even experiencing growth in newspaper readership and circulation, such as India (Kamble et al., 2017; Tripathi et al., 2024). Consequently, the existing picture of the newspaper markets worldwide is complex and mixed (Levy and Nielsen, 2010; Nielsen, 2016), requiring careful consideration of regional contexts.

Although the degree of influence on newspaper markets varies from nation to nation, changes brought by technologies, economic dynamics, and social transformation have significantly influenced newspapers and journalism in many parts of the world (Siles and Boczkowski, 2012). The popularisation of digital technologies in the media sector has shifted traditional newsroom practices and values, changed news consumption ecology and threatened the conventional business models of newspapers (Adams, 2008; Compton and Benedetti, 2010; Waschková Císařová, 2024; Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009; Siles and Boczkowski, 2012). More importantly, conventional business models of newspapers,

specifically over-reliance on advertising, is one significant reason for the decrease in newspapers' (Picard, 2008). Also, economic environments, such as the financial crisis (Kaye and Quinn, 2010; Kirchhoff, 2010) and the concentration of newspaper markets (van der Burg and Van den Bulck, 2017) all affected newspaper publishers.

According to Van der Burg and Van den Bulck (2017) and Siles and Boczkowski (2012), most innovative efforts carried out by newspaper firms are efficiency oriented. While newspaper publishers tried to maintain stability by controlling costs to keep cost efficiencies, they are also experimenting with alternative business models to innovate (Siles and Boczkowski, 2012). Pay models for online news, such as paywalls, freemium models, memberships, and micropayments, have been popularly adopted by newspapers (e.g., *The New York Times* and *The Financial Times*) to reinvigorate their business models (Simon and Graves, 2019). However, some attempts have failed (e.g., *The Sun*) (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017), and digital revenues insufficiently offset the loss in advertising revenues of newspaper firms (Carson, 2015; Pickard and Williams, 2014). Other various commercial activities, such as utilising return path data, experimenting with e-commerce and games, holding events and seminars, and maintaining a digital community, were also regarded by newspaper managers as critical opportunities to build alternative revenues (Bakker, 2013; Doyle, 2013a). However, most of these innovative efforts are still rooted in their long-established business models (Doyle, 2013a).

Digital technologies have largely diminished the technological boundaries of media; thus, content can be easily obtained, shared, and re-cycled across various media platforms (Doyle, 2013b; Goyanes and Dürrenberg, 2014). Changes in market demands and consumer expectations also urged newspaper firms to develop multiplatform strategies (Doyle, 2013a; García-Avilés et al., 2014) to immigrate their contents and services onto websites (Adams, 2008), tablets (Gershon, 2013; Krumsvik et al., 2013b), and mobiles (Thurman, 2014; Peter et al., 2016) to attract digital users. Additionally, newspaper organisations reorganised their resources, such as increasing digital-oriented labour and investments (Doyle, 2015). Although newspaper organisations positively embraced new technologies to develop multiplatform products and services, they still found it hard to monetise digital content and users to establish sustainable business models (Holm, 2013). Thus, introducing new products or services also requires value proposition redesign and fundamental business model renewal (Evens and Van Damme, 2016).

From an institutional perspective, studies indicate that many newspaper publishers have followed the *isomorphic* trajectory in their innovative efforts (Küng, 2013; Lehtisaari et al., 2018; Villi et al., 2020). Based on surveys of editors and news websites, Lowrey (2011) found that newspapers' institutional nature, characterised by adherence to established networks or "strong ties," significantly delayed innovation as they sought legitimacy and stability. Similarly, Cestino and Berndt (2017) observed that the institutional focus on familiar actors hindered value creation and renewal by limiting engagement with new, less familiar "weak ties." Since radical innovations often arise from interactions within weak-tie networks, this reliance on strong-tie networks can restrict innovative potential. Despite the limited application of institutional theory to studies on news organisation innovation, the research provided by Lowrey (2011) and Cestino and Berndt (2017) highlights the importance of understanding how shared beliefs, values, and ideals composing institutional arrangements affect legacy newspaper innovation.

Applying Schumpeter's notion of "creative destruction" – the continuous economic process of destroying the old and creating the new – thus provides valuable insights into current innovation phenomena in the newspaper industry (Schlesinger and Doyle, 2015). Innovation should not merely be a strategic goal for creating the new but a dynamic process of constantly replacing the old methods with adaptive approaches to meet the evolving expectations of consumers (Paulussen, 2016). Long-established institutional logic has constrained newspaper firms' ability to reinvigorate their business models (Bakker, 2013b; Schlesinger and Doyle, 2015). The adaptation and innovation process of newspaper organisations are therefore also matters of cultural change (Küng, 2011; Paulussen, 2016). Understanding the challenges and complexities associated with this culture shift at the organisational level is crucial for facilitating effective change and innovations in newspaper firms.

2.2.3 Cultural Constraints in Innovations

Based on *Disruptive Innovation Theory*, Christensen and Raynor (2013, p.346) proposed three sets of factors most critical to determining whether organisations can accomplish desired innovation: "Resources" (e.g., people, facilities, brand), "Processes" (i.e., informal and formal processes that people follow), and "Values" (i.e., the standards of prioritising decisions by members), which they articulate as the RPV framework. Among the three sets of factors, "processes" and "values" are inextricably linked, and the interaction between them shapes organisational culture. As Christensen and Raynor (2013) argued, organisational capability for innovation is largely determined by processes and values which

are embedded in culture, especially for matured organisations. Newspaper organisations are complex social systems with distinct cultures, values, and norms (Singer, 2004). They have been confident of their past success (Bakker, 2013b; Groves and Brown, 2020), and their established “processes” and “values” have become assumptions that guide their members to act autonomously and consistently (Christensen and Raynor, 2013; Karimi and Walter, 2015).

However, such a strong culture has become a major constraint on newspapers’ capabilities in responding to digital disruptions (Küng, 2016; Picard, 2003). Evidence can be found in the scepticism from journalists (Gade and Lowrey, 2011; Gade, 2004), the struggle in cultural clash (Witschge and Nygren, 2009), cultural resistance in adopting new technologies and processes (Garrison, 2001; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008), and the uncertainty perceived by media managers (Lowrey, 2011). News practitioners are not unaware of the significance of digital innovation (Groves and Brown, 2020; Küng, 2015), but they still tend to get their work done with great dependencies on previous routines and resources (Groves and Brown, 2020). The institutional perspective on newspaper innovations mentioned earlier (Cestino and Berndt, 2017; Compton and Benedetti, 2010; Lowrey, 2011) highlights structural factors’ role in maintaining a strong organisational culture, which, in turn, can reinforce these institutional structures.

Additionally, scholars focusing on organisational behaviours also offer psychological explanations for why strong cultures persist. Psychologically, people are often afraid of what is unknown but are comforted by what is familiar (Paton and McCalman, 2008). Schein (2010) believes the resistance to change comes from the interaction between *survival anxiety* and *learning anxiety*. The anxiety results from one or multiple fears, including fears of losing power and position, feelings of incompetence to master the new way, and fears of losing identity (Schein, 2010, p.231). Thus, from the individual perspective, the persistence of strong cultures is rooted in people’s psychological preference for the familiar and resistance to change due to these anxieties and fears. Addressing and reducing members’ anxiety about uncertainties brought about by changes is crucial for promoting cultural change and innovation in media management. However, research on this concern remains limited.

Rogers (2010) noted that innovation is communicated in a social system, and members within the social system will be less motivated if the innovative initiatives are not consistent with their existing identities and cultures (Groves and Brown, 2020). Schein (2010) highlighted that new culture reproduction must mesh with the assumptions of *Marco cultures*

(cultures that operate beyond organisations, such as occupational cultures and national cultures); otherwise, the new culture “will not survive”. Consequently, change initiatives must fit into the existing culture to motivate members without threatening members’ identities (Groves and Brown, 2020). However, balancing the culture change and the existing *Marco culture* to motivate members is a challenging task, which calls for substantial change management skills. Thus, concerns about the extent of the role of leadership in dealing with cultural constraints are crucial to understanding possibilities in managing intended cultural change (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2015).

Leadership theory proposes that the ability of leaders to understand and work within cultures significantly influences organisational culture (Hennessey Jr, 1998). Further, organisational culture theorists have probed into the positive interplay between organisational culture and leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1994). However, the more mature organisations become, the more complex managing culture change by organisations’ leaders can be (Schein, 2010). Siehl’s (1985) study on new managers’ efforts to change cultures indicated limited possibilities in shaking “deeper” levels of matured organisational cultures. Indeed, changing cultures is highly challenging, especially in stabilised organisations. Even leaders and managers can act as cultural constraints since they may fail to recognise themselves as part of change objects or may neglect their role in blocking desired changes (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2015). Still, managers know little about how to act in their balancing role to connect desired changes with existing cultures (Groves and Brown, 2020).

To address cultural constraints, *motivations* can also be a valuable perspective for understanding and reducing cultural resistance within organisations. Motivations are the underlying reasons that drive specific organisational behaviours to be initiated and sustained to achieve certain goals. In this context, *Self-Determination Theory* (SDT) proposed by Deci and Ryan (2012) provides a prominent framework used in organisational studies and also innovation studies. According to SDT, there are two major primary types of motivations that drive human behaviours in the workplace: *autonomous motivation*, which is self-driven and comes from one’s own interests and values; and *controlled motivation*, which is actions driven by external factors such as seeking approval, gaining rewards, or avoiding punishment (Gagné and Deci, 2005; Hagger et al., 2014). Research has shown that the more employees’ psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met, the greater the likelihood of fostering self-motivation in organisational behaviours (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Empirical studies applying SDT have demonstrated that motivation is crucial to facilitating acceptance of organisational change (Gagne et al., 2000) and innovations

(Stremersch et al., 2022), and it is also highly relevant to leadership studies (Deci et al., 2017; Sheldon et al., 2003). However, the application of SDT in media management studies remains very limited.

For organisational culture studies, there is a debate over whether to change values and beliefs first or behaviour first in academia regarding changing cultures. Some believe changing beliefs and values should be conducted first to guide people's decision-making (Karimi and Walter, 2015). However, successful cases of cultural change indicated that culture could be changed by beginning with "new actions" instead of communicating the desired culture by leaders (Kotter et al., 2021). An action-first approach demonstrated Schein's (2010, p.238) argument that new cultures will not be formed solely by imposing new ways of doing work; it must provide members with a new set of shared experiences and convince them that the new methods work better. However, there is limited empirical research on how newspaper organisations handle this process. Specifically, it is unclear whether they recognise cultural constraints and how they manage these challenges. Further exploration is therefore needed.

2.3 Media Ownership

As highlighted in Chapter 1, ownership serves as a central node of the current research that bridges multiple structural elements and plays a critical role in shaping organisational cultures and innovation within Chinese newspapers. This section reviews how scholars have conceptualised and analysed media ownership to understand its impact on organisational practices.

2.3.1 Corporate Ownership

According to Putterman (1993, p.245), ownership is "a bundle of rights that an economic agent is entitled to exercise over an asset", including "the right of utilisation, the right to the products of the asset, and the right to alienate or dispose of an asset and these rights of utilisation and return." This definition underscores the crucial role of owners in holding the power of control over organisational decisions. One main research interest in ownership studies is the outcomes of different ownership types. Boyd and Solarino (2016) identified six types of ownership commonly discussed in the literature: *institutional ownership* (Cornett et al., 2007), *insider ownership* (Zingales, 1995), *blockholder ownership* (Thomsen et al., 2006), *family ownership* (Villalonga and Amit, 2006), *business group ownership* (Yiu et al., 2007), and *state ownership* (Boardman and Vining, 1989). However, scholars may adopt diverse classifications of ownership types based on their particular interests, such as

foreign ownership (Dahlquist and Robertsson, 2001), *government ownership* (Borisova et al., 2012), *private ownership* (Shleifer, 1998) according to the identity of owners, or *Authority*, *Rentier*, *Generalist*, and *Specialist* owner types based on power and return dimensions from sociology (Wahl, 2006). Many studies are keen to understand the impact of different ownership types on organisational outcomes, such as firm performance (Kang and Sørensen, 1999), innovations (Aghion et al., 2013), organisational cultures (Dam and Scholtens, 2012), strategies (Liu et al., 2011) and social responsibility (Dam and Scholtens, 2012).

Regarding theoretical approaches applied in ownership studies, Boyd and Solarino (2016) highlighted three main theories that have been commonly adopted in existing literature:

The first is *Agency Theory* (Jensen and Meckling, 1976), which has been widely applied to help research the issues that aroused the different interests between owners and managers. While some businesses are directly managed by owners, such as family-owned businesses, complex modern corporations, such as publicly held business corporations, are hardly directly controlled by shareholders over the management decisions (Fama and Jensen, 1983). Corporate investors prefer liquidity and thus often diversify their investments to protect their wealth; but more diffused ownership often leads to more potential conflicts among diverse owners, promoting the need for independent and professional managers to make neutral decisions on managing firms (Spieler and Murray, 2008). However, separating ownership and control often presents conflict interests between “principal” (capital owners) and “agent” (firm managers), which is also the primary focus of agency theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976).

The second is the *Resource Based View Theory* (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). This theory has been widely used for exploring ownership advantages in gaining and utilising resources (Boyd and Solarino, 2016). Resources, as defined by Barney (1991, p.101), are those assets, capabilities, processes, attributes, information, knowledge and other resources that are controlled and managed by a firm which can allow the firm to develop and implement strategies for efficiency and effectiveness improvement. As owners may have varied capabilities in obtaining resources (Fernández and Nieto, 2006), empirical studies have demonstrated that different ownership types can impact strategy-making and firm performance (Chen et al., 2014; He et al., 2016). The third commonly applied theory is *Institutional Theory* (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). This theory has been mentioned in Section 2.1.1 for its use in helping understand the external factors that shape organisational

cultures, while it is also widely used by scholars to understand different ownership phenomena (e.g., organisational behaviours), and the impact of the institutional environment on owners' behaviours (Boyd and Solarino, 2016).

Although agency theory has been a dominant framework in studying ownership (Boyd et al., 2011), Eisenhardt (1989a) argued that relying solely on one theory captures only part of the reality, suggesting that integrating multiple theories can more effectively address organisational complexity (Boyd and Solarino, 2016). Several scholars have synthesised the above-mentioned theories into ownership studies (Bergh, 1995; Chen et al., 2014; Douma et al., 2006). Regarding the current study, adopting a multi-theoretical approach is a viable strategy. Agency theory can be used for analysing China's media ownership arrangements and the misalignment of interests between principals and agents. Resource-based View theory can explain how different types of owners affect resource advantages. Institutional theory can further complement this by examining the multifaceted impact of external environmental factors, such as national contexts and regulations, on culture and behaviours of Chinese newspaper organisations. The next section will specifically review existing studies on the media ownership.

2.3.2 Major Ownership Issues in Media Studies

Media ownership is not solely an economic issue; it is also often intertwined with political topics (Doyle, 2002). As one *node* within “a wider network of power that integrates state and market forces” (Schlosberg, 2016, p.8), media ownership also plays a crucial role in shaping economic, political, social, and cultural life (Noam, 2016). At the organisation level, media ownership remains fundamental to the understanding of how control is distributed within media organisations (Picard and Van Weezel, 2008; Napoli, 1997). Media owners not only impact decision-making around allocating resources, such as deciding budgets and appointing key executives (Doyle, 2002; Ohlsson, 2012) but also may influence editorial decisions and news reporting directly (Gilens and Hertzman, 2000).

To sufficiently explore how this concept has been examined in existing studies, the author collected 119 references related to media ownership. These include six academic books, four book chapters, and 109 peer-reviewed journal articles published from 1981 to 2024, sourced from the *Sage* and *Taylor & Francis* online databases. References were selected based on the presence of terms like “media ownership,” “newspaper ownership,” “news media ownership”, “state ownership” in the title, keywords, or abstract. Some studies were

excluded as they did not approach the topic from the perspective of news media organisations, such as those discussing user ownership of media contents. Although this sectional review may not encompass all relevant literature, the quantity and quality of the selected sources are sufficient to provide comprehensive insights for current research interests. Starting with a general overview, the number of journal articles on media ownership collected by the current review shows an unstable upward trend since the late 1980s, peaking in the year 2021 (see Figure 2-4).

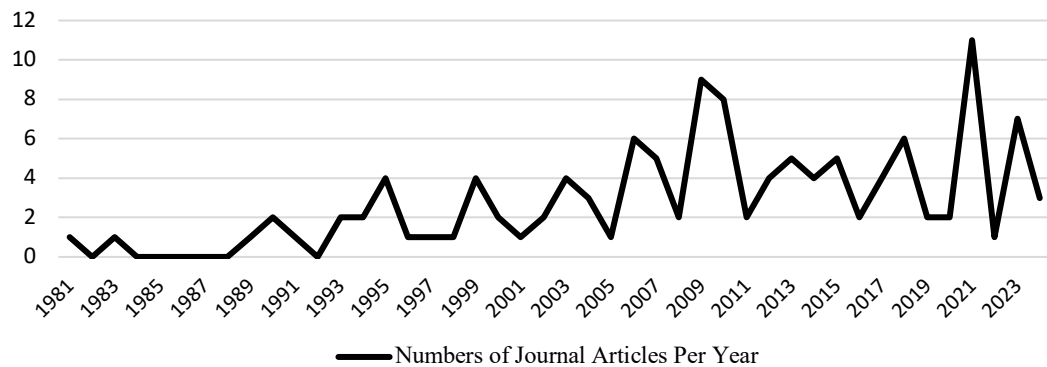


Figure 2-4. Numbers of Journal Articles on Media Ownership (1981-2024)

The most researched topic regarding media ownership is media ownership types and their consequences. The classification and use of ownership types in the literature are diverse and loose based on specific research interests. The current review identifies 17 types of media ownership, primarily distinguished based on the nature or attributes of the owner: **cross-media ownership** (Barendt, 1994; Bar'el, 2012; Doyle, 2002; Edwardson, 2007; Howard, 1989;1998;1995; Hibberd, 2007; Lee et al., 2020; Obar, 2009; Park, 2021; Pritchard et al., 2008; Sterling, 1981; Tiffen, 2007), **independent ownership** (Humprecht and Esser, 2018; Krumsvik et al., 2013a; Lacy, 1991; Rohlinger and Proffitt, 2017), **foreign ownership** (Brown, 1993; Edge, 2009; Goot, 1995; Hollifield, 1999; Salovaara and Juzefovics, 2012), **cooperative ownership** (Adams, 2001; Diamantopoulos, 2023; Lee and Hwang, 2004), **public ownership** (Humprecht and Esser, 2018; Lacy and Blanchard, 2003; Picard and Van Weezel, 2008; Wasburn, 1995), **private ownership** (Badr, 2021; Humprecht and Esser, 2018; Kiwanuka-Tondo et al., 2012; Ojo, 2018; Picard and Van Weezel, 2008; Silverblatt, 2004), **government ownership** (Kiwanuka-Tondo et al., 2012; Ojo, 2018; Wasburn, 1995), **state ownership** (Badr, 2021; McKinley, 2008; Obar, 2009; Pandey, 2022; Wang and Ang, 2010; Zhang, 2010), **group ownership** (Barrett, 2005; Krumsvik et al., 2013b), **authority ownership** (Kasoma, 1990), **corporate ownership** (Dunaway, 2013; Humprecht and Esser, 2018), **foundation ownership** (Achtenhagen et al., 2018; Ohlsson, 2012), **not-for-profit ownership** (Picard and Van Weezel, 2008), **chain ownership** (Dunaway, 2013), **employee**

ownership (Picard and Van Weezel, 2008), **institutional ownership** (Picard, 1994), **white ownership** (Tomaselli, 1997) and **black ownership** (Mabote, 1996).

These classifications have been commonly used for researching the consequences of ownership types, including **economic performance** (Achtenhagen et al., 2018; An et al., 2006; Barrett, 2005; Doyle, 2002; Picard and Van Weezel, 2008), **digital innovation** (Krumsvik et al., 2013b; Krumsvik, 2015; Wu and Garrison, 2021), **news operation and media practice** (Bailard, 2016; Blankenship and Vargo, 2021; Chomsky, 2006; Dunaway, 2013; Edwardson, 2007; Ekayanti and Xiaoming, 2018; George, 2007; Hollifield, 1999; Kiwanuka-Tondo et al., 2012; Lacy, 1991; Lee and Hwang, 2004; McKinley, 2008; Napoli and Yan, 2007; Pritchard et al., 2008; Rohlinger and Proffitt, 2017; Riedl, 2019; Salovaara and Juzefovics, 2012; Toff and Mathews, 2021; Wagner and Collins, 2014; Wasburn, 1995), **management behaviours** (Blankenburg and Ozanich, 1993; Lacy and Blanchard, 2003; Ohlsson, 2012; Picard, 1994), **press autonomy and freedom** (Kovalev, 2021; Mabote, 1996; Pandey, 2022; Price, 2003), and **diversity of news and pluralism** (Benson et al., 2018; Coffey, 2018; Garz et al., 2023; Goot, 1995; Hibberd, 2007; Hendrickx and Van Remoortere, 2023; Humprecht and Esser, 2018). Notably, the relationship between journalism and ownership types received the most scholarly attention, while limited studies have touched upon the owners' influences on organisational culture and managerial behaviours.

State ownership, a specific focus of current research, has received limited attention in media studies, with existing research being fragmented and highly context-specific. The definition of state ownership remains unclear and is often applied loosely. For example, Noam (2016) defines media firms owned by public authorities as state ownership. However, this type of ownership presents varied circumstances globally. In practice, state ownership can encompass different structures; for instance, while all newspaper firms in China are state-owned, local governments also own their local newspaper organisations (Hang et al., 2016). Consequently, understanding state ownership in authoritarian contexts requires further empirical investigation. Besides, existing studies on state ownership primarily focused on state media strategies towards political and economic dynamics (e.g., Badr, 2010; Zhang, 2010) and its influence on journalism and press freedom (McKinley, 2008; Pandey, 2022). State ownership is often considered advantageous for resource acquisition and long-term development, with lower efficiency (Abramov et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2017). However, concerning its impact on news media organisations in terms of culture, resource capability, and innovation strategies, it remains an understudied issue.

Apart from ownership types and their consequences, another significant portion of the collected literature on media ownership also addresses the issue of media concentration. In the context of a borderless economy, global market competition, deregulation policies, and emerging technologies (Doyle, 2002), the growing level of media concentration is primarily driven by the economic, financial, strategic and also political motives of media owners (Harcourt and Picard, 2009; Ryabinska, 2011). This has become a global phenomenon, particularly between 2004 and 2011 (Noam, 2016). Existing literature highlights several key aspects that scholars have explored, including **classifying media ownership concentration** (Badr, 2021; Hrvatin and Kerševan, 1999), **measuring media concentration** (Angelopulo and Potgieter, 2013; Barendt, 1994; Brown, 1993; Chen, 2002; Freedman, 2014; Mehta, 2015; Noam, 2009; Rijal and Tacchi, 2013; Schnyder et al., 2024; Vizcarrondo, 2013), **causes of ownership concentration** (Doyle, 2002; Harcourt and Picard, 2009), **consequences of media concentration** (George, 2007; Goyvaerts et al., 2024; Mooney, 2010; Neimanns, 2023; Pakvis and Hendrickx, 2023; Ryabinska, 2011), and **media coverage on media concentration** (Herzog and Scerbinina, 2021).

In terms of the consequences of media concentration, a major concern is that concentrated ownership may reduce news diversity and threaten media pluralism. However, empirical findings on this issue are inconsistent. Some studies indicate that consolidated ownership can decrease the overall audience size (Mooney, 2010) and reduce news diversity (Angelopulo and Potgieter, 2013; Pakvis and Hendrickx, 2023). Conversely, other studies suggest that the increased concentration can lead to a higher volume of news reporting (George, 2007) with limited effects on news coverage content (Pakvis and Hendrickx, 2023) and quality (Edwardson, 2007). Additionally, some scholars argue that consolidated ownership can enhance product differentiation, benefiting consumers (George, 2007), and strengthening economic performance (Angelopulo and Potgieter, 2013). Nevertheless, it is important to note that when media ownership is concentrated in the hands of the state (Badr, 2021) or industrial oligarchs whose primary business lies outside the media sector (Ryabinska, 2011), the negative consequences, such as threats to press freedom and independence, increased news homogenisation, and the creation of conditions that favour authoritarian populism (Schnyder et al., 2024) become more pronounced and concerning. Thus, the impact of media concentration is a highly context-dependent topic and has not yet been systematically studied, requiring further research.

Additionally, this issue is closely linked to media policy and regulations, which is a significant aspect of media ownership studies. Existing scholarly discussions on ownership

policy and regulation are predominantly focused on capitalist countries, including the U.S., the UK, European countries, and Australia. The U.S.-based studies primarily reviewed the Federal Communications Commission rules regarding cross-media ownership (e.g., broadcasting-newspaper) (Napoli and Gillis, 2006; Risley, 1995; Sterling, 1981), merits or drawbacks of restricting ownership concentration (Baker, 2006; Obar and Schejter, 2010), and questioned the limited public participation in policy-making (Blevins and Brown, 2010; Obar and Schejter, 2010; McChesney, 2004). In terms of media ownership regulations in the UK, studies provide critical analysis of the policy dynamics in balancing public interest policy priorities (Doyle, 2002; Freedman, 2008) and measuring media pluralism (Feintuck, 2009) and methodological consideration on policy analysis (Freedman, 2014). Additionally, European countries present diverse approaches to media ownership regulations, and scholars often compare policy and regulations between different European countries or with other countries, such as the UK and the U.S. (Craufurd Smith, 2013; Valcke, 2009), as well as the terms of policy challenges and areas for improvement, such as ownership transparency and monitor approach (Craufurd Smith, 2013; Craufurd Smith et al., 2021; Harcourt and Picard, 2009). Australian researchers, however, focus more on the insufficient regulation of growing foreign ownership (Brown, 1993) and economic-dominant policy approach (Tiffen, 2007).

Notably, ownership is a critical aspect of media policy and regulation in every country, as media organisations produce not only goods and services but also “peculiar commodities” that significantly shape social consciousness (Murdock, 2005, p.114). However, profit maximisation often takes precedence in ownership concerns (Lacy, 1991; Napoli, 1997; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Consequently, regulating ownership is both crucial and highly challenging, as policymakers must navigate and balance economic, political, and public interests surrounding this issue. Media convergence has further intensified the conflicts and complexity of various interests. Since the 2010s, scholarly attention to the ownership of online news platforms has been growing (Humprecht and Esser, 2018; Krumsvik, 2009; 2015; Wu and Garrison, 2021), and the digital media market presents a greater concentration than traditional offline media (Noam 2009; 2016). Consequently, the dynamic interactions between media policy, ownership, and new and legacy media organisations are highly worthy of further research.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter offers a systematic review of the existing literature on organisational culture, media innovation, and media ownership. Despite their significance, these themes—

organisational culture, organisational innovation, and state media ownership—have been insufficiently explored within the field of media management studies. Integrating scholarly discussions from both within and beyond media research provides valuable theoretical insights for the current research design. These include organisational culture theory for analysing media firm cultures, agency theory and institutional theory for understanding media ownership arrangements in China, SDT for understanding organisational behaviours, and Resource-based View theory along with the concept of dynamic capabilities for evaluating Chinese newspaper firms' adaptation capabilities, focusing on their actions in sensing, seizing, and transforming. Although these theoretical perspectives offer a robust basis, existing research on China's media policy and newspaper industry remains limited. The next chapter will address this gap by synthesising relevant studies both within and outside China, offering a comprehensive review of China's media policy landscape and industry background.

3 China's Media Policy and Newspaper Industry

This chapter provides a background introduction to the evolution of the newspaper industry in China, combined with a critical review of the interplay between the industry evolution and China's media policy. By tracking the short history of China's media reform since the 1970s, this chapter first offers a brief review of China's unique political, economic, and social dynamics on which the Chinese press system used to be based. This chapter also reviews China's media policy and regulations on the newspaper industry since the emergence of digital technologies. Correspondingly, by combining official statistics and academic papers published in both English and Chinese domains, this chapter provides an updated introduction to China's newspaper industry, especially since the advent of digital disruption.

3.1 Media Commercialisation

Although China's media sector began its commercialisation process in the late 1970s, Chinese newspaper organisations are still in the process of improving their level of commercialisation (which means they are still not fully commercialised) when simultaneously adapting to digital disruptions. This section reviews the historical evolution of Chinese media commercialisation, particularly in the newspaper industry, to understand the transition from government-funded institutions to cultural enterprises under *dual-track management* (Downing, 1996). This chapter argues that this transition reflects China's policy intention to promote corporate governance of newspapers, aiming at positioning them as market entities and shifting the government's role to market supervisor and regulator. However, China's existing media policy on commercialisation also reiterates party leadership and state ownership over news publishers, strictly restricting private and foreign capital from accessing core segments (i.e., news production and publication) to ensure absolute editorial control. Through following policy review, it is evident that China-specific dual management has unleashed the media market dynamism along with supportive policies. However, this review chapter also argues that "dancing with shackles" is still limiting Chinese newspaper organisations' autonomy in making organisational strategies and realising their "genuine-market-entity" role, posing multiple challenges particularly in the digital era.

With the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the formation of publicly owned news and communication system began in China, and the regulatory body

the General Administration of Press and Publication (新闻总署) was established as the regulatory body leading and managing all types of news media in China (Zhao et al., 2019). The most notable historical phase of Chinese media reform, known as the phase of media commercialisation (Sparks, 2010; Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011), began with the Chinese economic reform (改革开放) since the late 1970s. In the year 1978, eight leading news publishers in China jointly submitted one report to the Ministry of Finance to request pilot employment of enterprise management to newspaper organisations as public institutions. This report was finally approved by the Ministry of Finance, marking the first time that China officially approved for commercial operation of newspapers (Huang and Chen, 1997). This shift is not only due to the alignment with the change in China's governance priorities from social revolution to economic development (Zhao, 2012) but also driven by the subsidy burdens on China's authority to cover all newspaper titles nationwide (Huang and Chen, 1997). Consequently, since 1979, China's authority started to incrementally deregulate the commercial autonomy of newspaper organisations by officially beginning with formalising the legality of newspapers engaging in limited commercial business including advertising and circulation.

In addition to gradually deregulating the commercial operation of newspaper organisations, another significant measure of China's media governance in the process of media commercialisation is the *gradual* adjustment of the institutional nature of news publishers. The first adjustment was the official recognition of newspaper organisations as journalistic entities carrying the mission of disseminating public-needed information rather than as propaganda units only. In 1979, the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which supervises the ideology, public opinion, and journalism at the national level, amended the long-standing sole role of the Chinese press as propaganda tools into information dissemination instruments for the first time (Tang and Cui, 2018). This marks the first time that the journalistic attributes of the Chinese press are officially acknowledged by China's media policy. By supporting both the commercial and journalistic attributes, since the late 1970s, China's newspaper industry saw significant growth in circulation and popularity, with advertising revenue surpassing circulation as the primary income source by 1999, marking increased commercialisation (Tang and Cui, 2018).

As for the commercial attribute of news publishers, another significant adjustment in China's media policy and regulations is the gradual establishment of Chinese newspaper organisations as *cultural enterprises* from *public institutions* (事业单位, typically funded and operated by the government and not primarily profit-driven), aiming to enhance the quality

of media commercialisation. After pilot practice in 35 Beijing-based cultural organisations since the year 2003, the Central Committee of CCP and State Council jointly issued one milestone policy promoting the institutional transition of news publishers, namely “Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Cultural System” (关于深化文化体制改革的若干意见) in 2005. In former policies, newspaper organisations were uniformly defined as *public institutions* (e.g., “Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Press, Publication, Broadcasting, and Film Industry” by NPPA in 2001). But since 2005, China started to apply classified management over newspaper organisations: significant paper titles such as Party organs carrying political and critical ideological missions remain as public institutions, while other general newspaper organisations and those commercial departments affiliated to public-institution-based press (e.g., Party papers) are encouraged to be gradually shifted into *enterprises*.

Since 2005, multiple regulatory bodies began to implement detailed measures to facilitate this transition. For instance, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of China issued a new policy on personnel system reform in 2006 to implement contract-based employment rather than permanent employment in all public-institution-based news publishers to adapt to the socialist market economy. Also, the Ministry of Finance and State Taxation Administration of China introduced incentive policies in 2005 for cultural enterprises (including newspapers) undergoing the transition to enterprise management¹. These incentives included exemptions from corporate income tax, property tax, and value-added tax. However, the most relevant and detailed policy fundamentally promoting this institutional transition is issued by NPPA, the key regulatory body overseeing China’s newspaper industry, titled “Further Advancing the Reform of the Press and Publication System” (关于进一步推进新闻出版体制改革的指导意见), in 2009. This document highlights the goal of *fully* restructuring commercial press and publication units to establish “a modern enterprise system”. Beyond merely “becoming enterprises”, NPPA emphasised that all “commercial newspapers” and those “commercial units” affiliated with “non-commercial news publishers” needed to evolve into “genuine market entities as soon as possible”, capable of autonomous operation and market competitions.

To enhance the enterprise management of Chinese newspapers, a significant institutional shift has been the introduction of a *Sponsor-oriented System* (出资人制度) complementing the long-established *Supervisor-oriented System* (主管主办制度). The *Supervisor-oriented*

¹ The policy has been updated every five years, with the most recent extension to the year 2023.

System, an administrative system originating from China's planned economy since 1949, grants supervisory authorities' direct control over media firms. However, the "Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Cultural System" (2005) introduced a *Sponsor-oriented system* to better define the rights and responsibilities of supervisory authorities, thereby promoting a "modern corporate governance structure." This system designates supervisory entities as *investors* and acknowledges newspaper firms as *legal entities* (Fu, 2014). The co-existence of the two systems suggests China's policy intention to corporatise media ownership while maintaining state control. However, Fu (2014) argues that implementing the sponsor-oriented system into cultural industries faces multiple challenges, such as the insufficient authority of direct sponsor entities in decision-making regarding state property and the conflicting priorities among public interest, business interests, and government objectives. Yet, there is limited scholarly discussion on the role of supervisory entities in this corporatised system and its implication for Chinese newspaper industry.

In addition to promoting enterprise management at commercial press organisations, NPPA also recognised that China's newspaper industry was facing multiple significant constraints limiting the industrial economic development, including "dispersed resource", "homogeneous structures", "regional barriers", "low industry concentration", "small scale", and "lack of market competition" in the above-mentioned policy titled "Further Advancing the Reform of the Press and Publication System" (2009). As China had experienced a long-term planned economy from 1949 to 1979 (Fei, 2004), the allocation of press resources in China was regionally dispersed and attached to the administrative system with low efficiency, rather like an affiliated propaganda department than a press entity. Therefore, in the process of media commercialisation, China applied multiple policies targeting structural reform of the media industry to enhance market competition and resource allocation. For instance, in 2002, in its issued "Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television Industry" (关于深化新闻出版广播影视业改革的若干意见), NPPA adjusted that the development of the Chinese press and publication industry should be more *scale-oriented* and *quality-oriented* (rather than focusing on quantity expansion with dispersed operation) by strategic restructuring across media, regions, industries, and ownership types.

The first noticeable measure to respond to the above-mentioned issues, implemented by China's central authority, is to promote media conglomeration to increase media concentration in China's newspaper industry. In 2002, NPPA issued "Several Opinions on the Establishment of Conglomerates in the News and Publishing Sector" (关于新闻出版业

集团化建设的若干意见), aiming to develop media conglomeration to increase industry concentration and achieve economies of scale. Beginning with the establishment of the *Guangzhou Daily Press Group* (1996) and another five press groups (*Nanfang Daily*, *Yangcheng Evening News*, *Guangming Daily*, *Economic Daily*, and *Wenhui-Xinmin*) in 1998 (Chin-Chuan, 2003), China now has 43 press groups in total (NPPA, 2023a). NPPA also encourages news publishers to expand their business across different media types (e.g., newspapers, magazines, books, and digital publications), and cooperate with other media entities based in different regions.

Notably, China's media conglomeration is primarily driven by administrative fiat rather than market forces (Chin-Chuan, 2003). Existing studies on the global trend of media concentration have illustrated that the key drivers are often fundamental economic factors, such as high fixed costs, low marginal costs, network benefits, excess supply, price deflation, and risk diversification (Noam, 2016), most of which ultimately lead to the pursuit of economies of scope and scale (Doyle, 2002). However, as criticised by multiple Chinese scholars such as Shao and Chen (2004) and Wang (2008), China's media conglomeration did not naturally emerge from autonomous motivations for commercial interests but was propelled by government forces. Driven by the motive for "scale management" rather than "scale economy", Chinese scholar Yu Guoming (2002, cited in Chin-Chuan, 2003, p.10) criticised China's media conglomeration, arguing it risks inefficiency and waste due to blind investment and its rush to conglomerate. In addition to national media governance, the ambition to gain global influence in response to challenges from China's 2001 WTO entry and media globalisation is a key driver in shaping this policy (Chin-Chuan, 2003; Shao and Chen, 2004). Regardless of the effectiveness of China's media conglomeration, it has undeniably been a significant policy measure taken in the commercialisation process.

Another significant measure is the relaxation of regulations allowing non-state-owned capital into the Chinese newspaper industry. After China's WTO entry in 2001, the government began encouraging newspaper organisations to seek external capital for approved business projects, initially limited to state-owned funds. In 2005, the State Council issued the Notice on the "Decision on Several Issues Regarding the Entry of Non-Public Capital into the Cultural Industry" (关于非公有资本进入文化产业的若干决定的通知). This policy acknowledges and safeguards the legitimacy of non-public capital in the business activities of newspaper firms, although consistently restricting it from operating editorial operations or creating newspapers. Before this, private capital's involvement was an open secret but lacked legal acknowledgement and protection (Zhu, 2003), as exemplified by the

China Auto Pictorial case (Zhang, 2000). Overall, this policy shift both legitimises and encourages Chinese newspaper firms to expand their financial channels and explore opportunities in the capital market.

According to Scotton and Hachten (2010), despite being under a dual-track system, Chinese newspaper groups commonly adopted an *indirect* approach to enter the capital market, either by owning a subsidiary company that is already listed or by investing in listed stocks and restructuring a company once they had acquired enough shares to gain control (p.56). The case study of *Beijing Youth Daily*, conducted by Zhang (2010), demonstrates how Chinese newspaper groups have transitioned from total state control to “a split model”: it permits foreign capital to participate in business operations while maintaining party/state control over news content. Additionally, Zhang (2010) argues that, beyond this dual-track management, the corporate strategies of Chinese newspaper groups closely resemble those of their Western counterparts, pursuing conglomeration and relying heavily on advertising and circulation revenues. This further aligns with the research findings by Scotton and Hachten (2010, p.54).

In one empirical study examining the performance of six listed newspaper groups in China from 2006 to 2009, Chinese scholars Liu and Zhu (2011) found that the positive impact of the policy relaxation on market entry to news publishers’ financial performance is limited. This is primarily due to ongoing restrictions on accessing core newspaper operations, such as content production, as well as the increasing competition from digital media and the newspaper industry’s weak strategical adaptability (Ibid.). Additionally, Scotton and Hachten (2010) indicate that Chinese newspaper companies, after going public, largely rely on advertising revenue and often diversify their business into media-related or non-media sectors, leading to a loss of focus and market recognition for their core media activities. However, these studies do not adequately explain how these constraints are formed and function, which limits overall performance.

Overall, this section highlights the critical role of media policy in shaping the commercialisation of Chinese newspapers, with continuous adjustments to expectations, strategies, and boundaries. It can be concluded as six main aspects of China’s media commercialisation policy: 1) enabling news publishers for commercial autonomy in advertising and circulation, 2) gradually adjusting the institutional nature of news publishers, 3) implementing multi-departmental joint policies to support the transition from public institutions to enterprises, 4) introducing a sponsor-oriented system to facilitate enterprise

management of newspaper firms, 5) relaxing market entry with strictly implementing dual-track approach to ownership and management, and 6) promoting media concentration for economic efficiency and political motives. This provides essential background knowledge to understand the specificity of the Chinese media system and the dynamics within China's approach to media governance. The next section will provide an analysis of China's media policy and regulation since the rise of digital media and how they impact the newspaper industry.

3.2 Digital Disruption, Policy Response and De-marketisation

This section primarily focuses on how China's media policy environment has evolved in response to the rapid change of media infrastructures in China driven by digital disruptions (Tang and Iyengar, 2011). As noted by Wang and Sparks (2019b), China's legacy media experienced a flourishing period in title numbers, circulations and advertising revenues from the 1990s to the early 2000s. Emerging media technologies had not threatened the business models of newspaper organisations during the emerging period of digital technologies. Instead, they had been enthusiastically adopted by news publishers to extend their news delivery onto mobile and internet platforms. For instance, many Chinese press (e.g., *China Daily* and *China Trade News*) launched their news websites in 1995. However, with the rapid growth of social media platforms since 2009, Chinese news organisations have begun to experience disruptive impacts on business models and journalistic practices (Wang, 2023a).

Losing the leading role of Chinese news publishers in shaping public opinion in the digital space also challenges the ideological control by the Party and state. China's top leader, Xi Jinping, highlighted the emergency of holding power in leading public opinion in one national meeting in 2013²:

“Many people, especially young people, hardly consume mainstream media anymore; they get information mostly online. [We] must face this reality, increase our efforts, and quickly gain control over this new battleground of public opinion. [We] cannot be marginalised.”

² This quote is translated from Xi Jinping's speech delivered at the National Conference on Publicity and Ideological Work on August 19, 2013, reported by *People's Daily* via <http://CCP.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0822/c164113-30242991.html>

According to the China Internet Network Information Centre (2024), the number of internet users in China has reached 1.092 billion by December 2023. The wide application and popularity of social media has posed significant challenges to the ability of legacy media to meet the needs of the CCP’s “thought work” concerning public opinion (Wang, 2023a). These popular social media platforms in China can be categorised into three types: social media platforms (e.g., *Sina Weibo* and *WeChat*), algorithm news aggregators (e.g., *Toutiao* and *Tencent News*), and video-sharing platforms (e.g., *Douyin* and *Kuaishou*) (Chen, 2021). However, most of those popular social media platforms are privately owned. To reclaim influence over public opinion in the digital age and enhance its control over the digital space, China’s top authority has responded to emerging challenges with two major policy strategies: first, gradually tightening regulations on digital media market entry and ownership, and second, implementing media convergence as a national strategy.

Firstly, a significant regulatory development in the digital news media sector is the introduction of the unified national *negative list system for market access*, which has been in effect since 2018. In 2022, the National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Commerce updated this list³, introducing a series of restrictions on private capital entering the news media sector. Specifically, private capital is *prohibited* from:

- Conducting news collection, editing, and broadcasting.
- Investing in or operating news agencies, including but not limited to news agencies, newspaper publishers, radio and television broadcasters, radio and television stations, and internet news information gathering and publishing services.
- Managing the sections, frequencies, channels, programs, and social media accounts of news agencies.
- Engaging in live broadcasting of events related to politics, economics, military, diplomacy, major social issues, culture, science and technology, health, education, sports, and other areas that affect the political direction, public opinion, and value orientation.
- Introducing news from foreign entities.
- Organising forums, summits, and awards in the field of news and public opinion.

According to the previous lists, private capital was prohibited from news collection and editing, while this updated list further *expanded* the restrictions over multiple aspects of news media operation, especially the online news aspect. Combined with the *Licensed Management of Internet News Information Services* rule issued by the State Internet Information Office in 2017, social media platforms—mostly owned by private companies in China—are eligible only for an Internet Information Service License, which limits them to

³ This list can be accessed via <https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfb/ghxwj/202203/P020220325357066649367.pdf>

re-publishing and disseminating news content. In contrast, the Internet News Information Gathering and Publishing Service License, which grants exclusive rights to news production, is reserved solely for state-owned news agencies (Wang, 2020b). These multiple regulatory measures have further clarified and enhanced the absolute authority of state news agencies over the upstream stages of news production (Huang and He, 2021). Consequently, social media platforms in China remain dependent on traditional media, i.e., state media entities, for original news content (Chen, 2021). While these multi-regulations on market access to the news media sector prioritise the significance of state control over news media and public ideology (Huang and He, 2021), it also creates a “protective” policy environment that allows Chinese newspaper firms to grow and buffer amidst digital disruption.

Another significant policy response is the implementation of media convergence as a national strategy to improve the digital capability of state-owned news publishers. As one multi-faceted concept implied to various perspectives (Grant and Wilkinson, 2009; Meikle and Young, 2011; Wirth, 2006), *media convergence*, theoretically, refers to the ongoing trend of significant shifts in the relationship between technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences due to the emergence of digital media (Jenkins, 2004). In addition to the major drivers of media convergence commonly mentioned in Western journalism studies, i.e., market demands and technological development, China’s media convergence practice is highly dependent on policy promotion by China’s authorities (Xiong and Zhang, 2018). From an economic or technological standpoint, media convergence is considered a vital window of opportunities for the Chinese press to adapt and innovate in light of digital technologies. What is distinctive to China is that the Party and state view media convergence as an effective path to enhance the role of news media in communicating the state voice and monitoring public opinions through multiple communication channels (Yin and Liu, 2014).

In her book on Chinese journalism, Wang (2023, pp. 18-26) categorises the evolution of China’s media convergence policy into three stages: Convergence 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0. She argues that the convergence policy began with “tri-network convergence,” focusing on the integration of broadcasting, telecommunications, and the internet since 1999. However, this section primarily examines the latter two stages, as the term “media convergence” was officially introduced in policies issued by top-level authorities in 2014. It was jointly published by the General Office of CCP Central Committee and the State Council, namely “Guidance on Promoting the Convergent Development of Traditional Media and New Media” (关于推动传统媒体和新兴媒体融合发展的指导意见), outlining the requirements and deployment of the convergence between traditional media and new media in terms of content,

channels, platforms, business and management operations, aiming at constructing a range of innovative and competitive media groups. Afterwards, Chinese authorities further published documents to encourage and regulate multi-level media convergence, including financial support to facilitate the digitalisation of news media (Wang, 2023a, p.20).

The most recent official guidance, “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of In-depth Media Convergence” (关于加快推进媒体深度融合发展的意见), published by the General Office of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council in 2020, considered as the marking point of entering convergence 3.0 stage by Wang (2023, p. 26). This policy proposal further clarifies the ultimate goal of media convergence is:

“To build a full-media communication system rooted with content construction, supported by advanced technologies, and guaranteed by innovative management.”

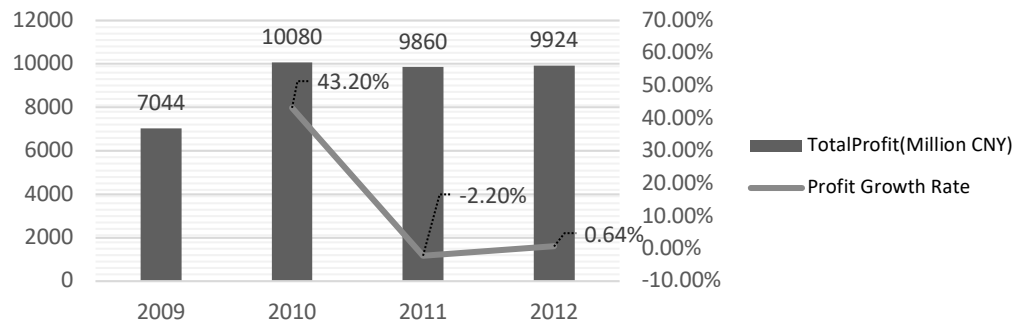
Here, “full-media”, also namely “omni media”, is a popular term coined by Chinese media practitioners and policymakers to guide media innovation and strategy-making. The term, full-media convergence, reflects oriental holism within China’s specific contexts (Ji et al., 2013). Although the official goal for convergence is to integrate multiple actors to realise media reform at multiple layers to rebuild the CCP media system (Wang, 2023a), most existing “full-media” practices carried out by Chinese news publishers remain similar to the previously mentioned “multi-platform strategies” (Doyle, 2013a), hardly challenging the fundamental logic of traditional news media (Xiong and Zhang, 2018).

There are a few successful cases of media convergence in China. One widely recognised example is the Central-Kitchen Model, an integrated media production and management system based on the principle of “single collection, multi-version production, multi-channel dissemination”, carried out by *People’s Daily*. This model has become a benchmark for other Chinese news publishers to follow (Wang, 2023a). The case of *Pengpai*, established by *Shanghai Press Group*, also became one mainstream online-only news media platform nowadays in China. As for strategic innovation, some newspaper firms employed the means of mergers and acquisitions to make up for their lack of technological capabilities and even extend their business out of the media industry. For instance, *Zhejiang Daily Press Group* extended their “platform structure” by acquiring two online game platforms with a vast user base (Gao, 2013). Besides, *Zhejiang Daily Press Group* cooperated with Chinese internet technology company *NetEase* to utilise user data and build their database. Additionally,

some newspaper firms also experimented with “flat management” to transform their established “hierarchical management” (Huang, 2017).

Regarding the actual outcome, however, studies suggest these innovative experiments are still highly dependent on their traditional business operation (Peter et al., 2016), not to mention the large group of “followers” in this wave of media convergence in China. Yin and Liu’s (2014) empirical research on *Shenzhen Press Group* based in southern China suggests that media convergence is more of a policy response to meet the expectations of authorities rather than self-motivated innovation. Additionally, Chinese press managers found it difficult to balance the expectations of the state policy and their commercial circumstances in terms of sustainable input on digital-oriented innovation (Huang, 2017). Many scholars have suggested that China’s media convergence is never purely a technological issue, but also involves Chinese media organisations negotiating and balancing their economic and political expectations (Wang, 2023a; Xiong and Zhang, 2018).

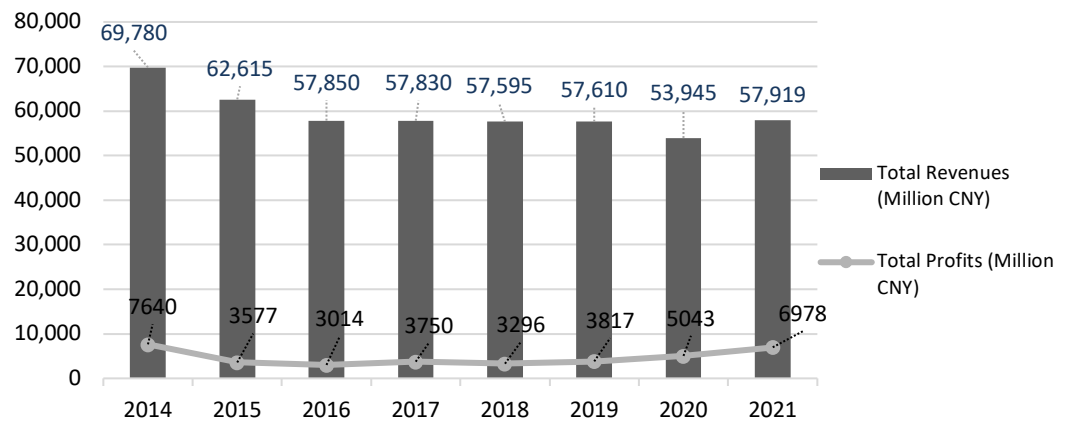
With a specific look at China’s newspaper industry, its transition is facing more severe challenges compared to the broadcasting and television sectors (Xiong and Zhang, 2018). While some scholars have noted that the Chinese newspaper industry’s decline began in 2013 (Chen, 2021), official data indicates that this decline started as early as 2011. According to statistics from NPPA, the profitability of the Chinese press industry grew rapidly in 2010 but experienced a sharp drop starting in 2011 (see Figure 3-1), largely due to the rapid expansion of digital media platforms (Ye, 2014). Furthermore, NPPA’s most recent data shows the total profits of China’s newspaper industry in 2021 were 6,978 million CNY (see Figure 3-2), significantly lower than the 10,080 million CNY reported in 2010. Although there has been a slight increase in the total revenues and profits since 2021, the past decade of media convergence policies has not yet resulted in a significant improvement in profitability for the Chinese newspaper industry.



*Data Source: NPPA

*Note: Since this official report started in 2009, there is no profit growth rate recorded in that year.

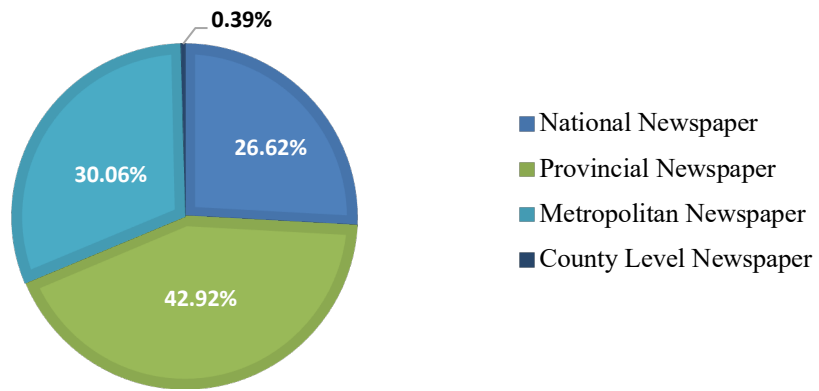
Figure 3-1. The Profitability of Chinese Newspaper Industry (2009-2012)



*Data Source: NPPA

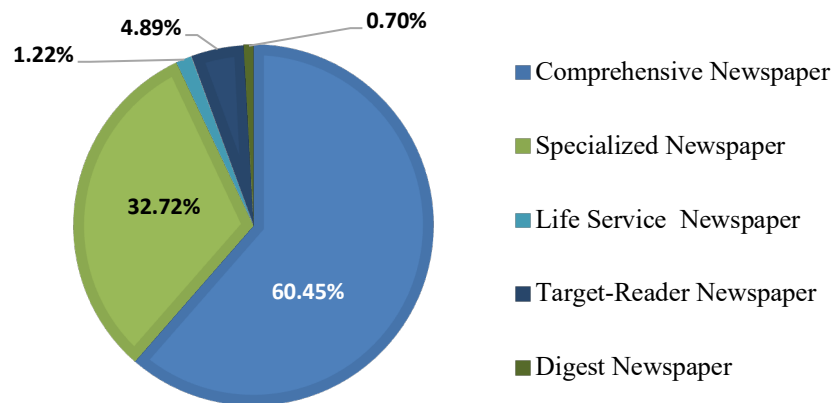
Figure 3-2. The Total Revenues and Profits of Chinese Newspaper Industry (2014-2021)

In addition, from 2015 to 2021, China's newspaper industry employment decreased from 241,600 to 165,900, and 154 newspaper titles were discontinued (NPPA, 2023a). By 2021, China had 1,752 newspapers (Ibid.), often categorised as *official* versus *non-official* (Stockmann, 2013), or *party-oriented* versus *market-oriented* newspapers (Wang, 2023a) based on their roles. NPPA (2023a) classified Chinese newspapers by regional hierarchy into *national*, *provincial*, *prefectural-city*, and *county newspapers*, with provincial newspapers having the largest share and county newspapers the smallest (see Figure 3-3). NPPA also classifies newspapers by content into *comprehensive*, *specialised*, *life-service-oriented*, *reader-targeted*, and *digest* newspapers (see Figure 3-4). However, Chinese scholars commonly categorise Chinese paper titles as *party*, *metropolitan*, *specialised*, or *industrial* (Zhang and Su, 2020). Notably, empirical research often focuses on the provincial (Peter et al., 2016; Wang and Sparks, 2019a; Xiong and Zhang, 2018; Yin and Liu, 2014), Party newspapers (Swanson, 1996), and metropolitan newspapers (Chen, 2021; Zhang, 2010).



*Data Source: NPPA (2023a)

Figure 3-3. Proportions in China's Newspaper Publications in 2021 by Regional Level



*Data Source: NPPA (2023a)

Figure 3-4. Proportions in China's Newspaper Publications in 2021 by Content Type

Compared to the comprehensive newspaper, *industrial newspapers* have been much less studied in China-based research. There were more than 120 industrial newspaper titles in China by 2011, and not many countries have such a large number of industrial newspapers like China (Cao, 2011). Industrial newspapers typically target specialised audiences, such as industry professionals, and provide more technical and professional news content. This specialisation makes them less susceptible to competition from general online platforms (Han, 2012). Many of these newspapers were historically established by ministries and commissions under the State Council to support varied departmental propaganda, reflecting strong characteristics of a planned economy (Han, 2012). Some are operated by China's central SOEs, such as *China Petroleum Daily* by *PetroChina* (one state-owned energy group), while others are managed by industrial associations with government backing or press groups (Cao, 2011). Thus, industrial newspapers involve varied state agents carrying different institutional interests in practice. This variety makes the typical binary classifications of Chinese newspapers (Stockmann, 2013; Wang, 2023a) less applicable, as

some industrial titles can simultaneously serve as official or Party publications while also being market oriented.

Importantly, recent empirical studies in China indicate early signs of *de-marketisation* in Chinese news media, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese scholars found that after experiencing a decline in advertising revenue, Party press groups in China exhibit their shift away from a market-driven approach for survival. For instance, Li and Dou (2019) found that *Guangzhou Daily Group* receives 350 million CNY as development funding from the Guangzhou Municipal Finance Bureau to cover daily circulation costs and seeks additional funding from the Party system for digital media initiatives. In addition to the financial factor, Wang and Sparks (2019a) and Wang (2023) suggests the increased political authoritarianism in China further tightened the connection between Party paper titles and the government, which additionally enhanced the press's dependence on government funding. Even for commercial titles, advertising revenues from government entities have been growing (Wang, 2023a, p.46). Furthermore, as Chinese newspapers increasingly engage in government propaganda activities to generate revenue, they have been criticised for losing their ethical standards (Qiu, 2024), leading to a broader crisis of Chinese journalism (Wang, 2023a).

Regarding this concerning sign of de-marketisation, it is essential to expand the current research scope to include industry newspapers. One critical reason is that existing findings are primarily based on regional press groups, which are usually supervised or sponsored by local governments. In contrast, industrial newspaper firms represent a diverse range of supervisory and sponsorship entities and generally have a weaker connection with government bodies. Therefore, examining industrial newspapers regarding de-marketising signs is meaningful to understand the dynamics within different Chinese newspaper firms' adaptations to China's unique political and economic contexts. Considering the changes in values and beliefs among Chinese journalists (Chen, 2021; Xiong and Zhang, 2018; Zhang and Su, 2020), there is still limited discussion on journalistic practice and managerial behaviours within industrial newspaper firms, which needs further research.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter reviews the historical evolution and recent dynamics of media commercialisation in China and examines how, in the digital age, China maintains the position and influence of its state-owned press system through various regulatory and policy

measures. It reveals that China's newspaper industry is still in a developmental stage and has not yet reached maturity, making it highly vulnerable to the country's unique political and economic dynamics. The growth and transformation of China's newspaper industry are closely responsive to policy and regulatory changes, in addition to technological and economic dynamics. This chapter further identifies several significant research gaps. First, existing studies often treat ownership arrangements within China's media system as background context rather than as a central research focus. This approach neglects the crucial role that the agent entities of media owners play in newspaper practices. Second, research on the transformation of news media in China predominantly focuses on journalism and newsroom aspects, with insufficient attention to commercial or organisational perspectives. Lastly, studies on China's newspaper industry primarily concentrate on comprehensive newspapers or local press groups, overlooking the specialised newspapers that account for around one-third of Chinese newspaper publication. The next chapter will outline the research design and methods, providing a roadmap for further investigation into these underexplored areas.

4 Research Methodology

This chapter offers an outline of the research methods followed in the current study. It begins with re-clarifying research questions and then justifies the choice of qualitative research methods for this research. It gives details of the whole research process, including the use of multi-case study, document analysis, semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis. Each research method involves sampling strategies, data collection, and data analysis. Limitations of the chosen methods and ethical issues are discussed at the end of this chapter.

4.1 Research Objectives and Questions

This study draws on organisational culture theory as the starting point to conduct this research project. Based on the conceptual approach developed by Schein (2010), this study regards organisational culture as the *ideological result* of the interaction among a range of internal and external factors related to the organisation through time, guiding members to make decisions and solve problems for organisational development. Thus, the current study *does not* regard organisational culture as the fundamental cause but rather an analytical lens to capture the values, beliefs, and behaviours held and exhibited by Chinese newspaper organisations to understand what has led to this ideological result. However, organisational reality is often complex, influenced by a multitude of factors that shape both cultures and behaviours. This study posits that focusing on structural factors (Storsul and Krumsvik, 2013; van Moorsel et al., 2012) is essential for understanding the interplay between internal reactions and external forces that influence firm cultures and practices. Based on the identified research gap in previous chapters, this study highlights *media ownership* as the *node* for examining structural factors to understand the forming mechanism behind Chinese newspaper firms' cultures and behaviours.

Drawing from her seven years in China's newspaper industry, the author's personal experience aligns with the common findings about the weak capabilities of newspaper firms to adapt to digital changes, as their established values and assumptions resist challenge (Groves & Brown, 2020; Menke et al., 2018; Robotham, 2023). This fuelled the author's curiosity about the structural causes shaping or maintaining these cultures that limit newspaper firms from adapting and innovating. Furthermore, the current study also aims to understand which cultural aspects hinder innovation and which promote it, and whether these cultural factors are related to China's state ownership arrangement. Building on the research interests outlined, the central research question is:

How do media ownership arrangements in China influence the relationship between organisational culture and innovation capabilities within Chinese newspaper firms during the digital transition?

To ensure this doctoral project is more focused and manageable, this broad question has been broken down into three specific sub-questions. Each sub-question is designed to progressively explore the core themes of organisational culture, media ownership, and innovation capabilities. To address the gap in understanding how different entities exercise state-delegated ownership rights, a comparative question is included. This comparative approach aims to clarify the impact of this variability and enhance the reliability of the study's findings. Consequently, the three research questions are formulated as follows:

- RQ1: What are the shared and differentiated organisational culture phenomena among Chinese newspaper organisations?
- RQ2: How does media ownership play a role in the above-identified shared and differentiated organisational cultures?
- RQ3: To what extent does media ownership act as a source of cultural constraint over attempts to innovate among Chinese newspaper firms?

The first research question aims to compare cultural features across multiple Chinese newspaper organisations. This analysis will not cover all observable aspects of the cultural phenomenon but will focus on identifying the most common and distinctive cultural traits among these firms. The second question aims to address how Chinese newspaper organisations may share similar basic assumptions due to their common national and industry cultures and exhibit differentiated cultures derived from their different supervisory bodies acting as the agents of state ownership. The last question aims to explore how these basic assumptions may either constrain or promote innovation, investigating the extent to which China's state ownership influences these cultural factors as constraints or drivers of media innovation within Chinese newspaper firms. These clearly defined research questions and objectives shape the current research design, which will be detailed in the following sections.

4.2 An Interpretivist/Constructivist Paradigm

Given the identified research questions and objectives, this research principally deals with questions about how people make sense of their social worlds at the organisational level and how they express this understanding through multiple social artefacts (Deacon et al., 2021).

The current study supports the view that although the organisational reality is inevitably built on materials, as a social construct (Berger, 1967) making sense of organisations cannot be limited to the material meanings (Sułkowski, 2009). Deciphering cultures is not like “an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz, 1973, p.17). This argument is aligned with some organisational culture scholars’ views that cultures cannot be properly captured solely based on observable artefacts or predefined quantitative models (Kummerow and Kirby, 2013; Schein, 2010). Besides, conducting cultural analyses also requires an adequate understanding of the settings or context that the newspaper organisations are within (Holliday, 2007). Answering the identified research questions requires the understanding of human experience, dealing with “subjective meanings” rather than pursuing “objective ‘fact’” (Silverman, 2020), and thus the current study is qualitative in its nature.

This study aligns its research paradigm with constructivist stances. Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p.20) argue that a constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (multiple realities exist), a subjectivist epistemology (understanding co-creation of knower and respondent), and a naturalistic set of methodology procedures. As one branch within interpretive paradigms, constructivism assumes that realities of the world, including intangible realities, are socially constructed by human beings (Creswell, 2003), and thus the knowledge is subjective based on human experience. The current study also views organisational culture analysis as a reading of the organisational reality, aiming at understanding how organisational members make sense of their organisations. This also aligns with the interpretative approach adopted by some organisational culture scholars, such as Schein (2010) and Smircich (2017).

Informed by this interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, the qualitative research adopts a multiple-case study approach as its main research strategy, combined with multiple qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. This study not only deals with *exploratory* inquiry with “what” and “to what extent” but also requires a *descriptive* approach to answer the question of “how” (Yin, 2009). The case study approach can advantageously satisfy these research needs simultaneously, facilitating in-depth and detailed investigation based on the specific settings. Detailed discussion and description of this research process will be provided in the following sections.

4.3 A Multiple Cases Study

The distinctiveness of the case study is that it is “an empirical inquiry on a contemporary phenomenon, set within its real-world context-especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p.18). For the current study, the case study approach is particularly useful since it provides a naturalistic approach to explore and explain what happened within newspaper organisations within the contemporary context (Crowe et al., 2011). As indicated by the literature, the newspaper market worldwide is complex and mixed (Levy and Nielsen, 2010). Without careful consideration of the settings in which newspaper organisations operate, it will never reach an in-depth understanding of either organisational cultures or the link between structural conditions and the cultures. A case study also effectively provides a detailed description of the conditions of targeted newspaper organisations, helping generate insightful explanations for the research issues (Yin, 2011). Thus, the case study approach well suits the current study objectives.

In this study, cases are defined as “the main unit of analysis” (Yin, 2011, p.6) and are selected from Chinese newspaper organisations. The choice of China as the bounded geographic area for case studies is based on two primary considerations. First, the ongoing media convergence in China offers valuable opportunities to study a policy-driven approach to media innovation at the national level, which is unique to this context. The distinctive characteristics of China-based cases provide crucial insights into the research topic. Second, China presents a unique setting for exploring the interactions among media ownership, organisational cultures, and media innovation. Given the identified research gaps in studies on Chinese newspaper management and ownership policy, this China-based case study aims to fill this gap by offering a detailed examination of structural arrangements. Additionally, this study also seeks to provide empirical insights that can serve as a reference for future comparative studies with other national contexts.

This study selects three cases from the group of China’s industrial newspaper titles, i.e., *China Energy News* (中国能源报, CEN), *China Electric Power News* (中国电力报, CEPN), and *State Grid News* (国家电网报, SGN). Their names tell us they are national newspaper firms, targeting audiences from a similar market, i.e., the energy market in China. They all aim to serve audiences who are specialised in the energy industry. The current study classifies them as “industrial newspapers” (i.e., newspaper firms that serve audiences in a specific industry) and “vertical news media” (i.e., news media firms target audiences from

one segment or market). The first reason for selecting industrial newspapers as cases is that existing research on newspaper innovation is mainly based on mass media cases, such as metropolitan newspapers. This largely limits our understanding of the transformation of specialised commercial newspapers. As highlighted in Chapter 3, Chinese industrial newspapers tend to enjoy the advantages of higher market barriers and segmented audiences compared to daily newspapers that target a mass audience. The political-economic context in which specialised newspapers operate, along with their organisational cultures and strategic responses, merit more scholarly focus.

Additionally, the three selected cases share similar macro-level contexts, including national and industry-specific environments relevant to both the energy sector and the newspaper industry. This largely limits the influence of variations in external environments on the research findings. Most importantly, when sharing the same macro background, these three cases also present differences in their specific ownership arrangements. This particularly fits the need of the current study, i.e., evaluating and comparing the influence of state ownership on culture formation within newspaper firms. In terms of the general categories, all Chinese newspapers are owned by the state. However, especially when it comes to their actual supervisors (主管单位) and sponsors (主办单位), not all Chinese newspapers are owned by the same “state entity”. In this study, the three cases’ ownerships present different state-owned entities, including *press group*, *government*, and *non-media SOE* (see Table 4-1).

Case Name	Direct Supervisors/Sponsors	Agent Owner's Institutional Nature	Year Founded	Circulation
China Energy News	People's Daily	Press Group	2009	100,000
China Electric Power News	National Energy Administration of China	Government	1982	200,000
State Grid News	State Grid Corporation of China	Non-media SOE	2006	220,000

* All information was gathered from each newspaper firm's official website in 2023.

Table 4-1. A Brief Summary of Cases' Basic Information

By adopting a purposive multiple-case selection, this study aims to find typical cases to represent the existing Chinese newspaper ownership system. While it may carry potential subjective sample bias in the sampling process (Seawright and Gerring, 2008), the author recognised such a challenge and enhanced the representativeness of the cases by selecting multiple cases rather than one case or two cases to cover major types of institutional bodies acting as the owners of Chinese newspapers. Also, selecting cases is highly dependent on the accessibility of the organisations. Due to the strong political censorship in China, Chinese state-owned companies are highly prudent towards external reporting (Hassid, 2020). As the

accessibility of cases is one major issue to be considered in this research, the author adopts a convenience case selection to secure the accessibility and availability of data collection.

The author worked for CEN from 2011 to 2018, and the author is also familiar with the other two cases. While undeniably, a convenience approach raises a consideration of potential bias in sampling, the author's background allows the current study to "acclimate quickly" to the organisational settings and routines. As a researcher, the author has acknowledged this potential challenge associated with case studies, remained vigilant to possible biases, and carefully documented the research process. Covering all specific types of Chinese newspapers is obviously impossible. The current case selection is arguably one optimal solution based on actual conditions. More importantly, the representativeness of three cases can both satisfy the operability of induction and comparison, or namely "replication" (Yin, 2012, p.8), in this multiple-case study at the same time.

After identifying cases and selecting a multiple case study approach, the last step of case study strategy design is the use of theory (Yin, 2012). The current research applies a multi-theoretical approach, including organisational culture theory (Schein, 2010), agency theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976), institutional theory (Lammers et al., 2014), and SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000) to facilitate the analysis of each specific research question. Figure 4-1 illustrates the multi-theoretical framework design of the current study:

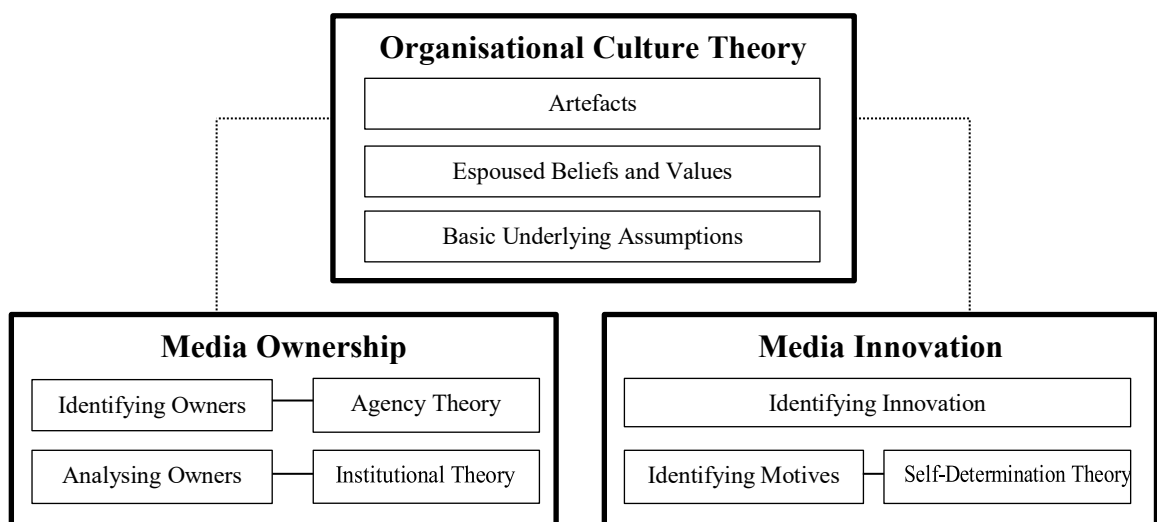


Figure 4-1. The Multi-theoretical Framework Design

Specifically, this study begins with an analysis of organisational culture using Schein's layer-based conceptual model (see Figure 2-2). This model guides the collection of observable data, including artefacts, espoused beliefs and values. Following this initial data collection, one-on-one interviews with members of each case study are conducted to validate

and interpret the observed cultural elements, allowing for an exploration of their underlying assumptions and the comparison among the three cases. Additionally, other theories are employed as explanatory tools to analyse and further conceptualise the findings to deepen the understanding of the observed phenomena. Based on this framework, following the suggestion by Yin (2009 and 2011), a case study protocol is created to assist the research in an orderly and efficient manner (see Table 4-2).

Phase	Step	Activity	Reason
1	Getting started	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies research questions Uses Schein's organisational culture theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhances external validity
	Selecting cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specifies newspaper category Non-random Sampling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constrains extraneous variation Sharpens external validity
	Crafting protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data requirements Multiple data collection methods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Triangulation enhances construct validity Sharpens reliability
2	Secondary data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Document from multiple sources Data collection protocol 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speeds textual and discursive data analysis Takes advantage of case features
	Secondary data analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discourse Analysis Uses Organisational Culture Theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preliminary theory generation Develop interview questions
3	Empirical data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Semi-structured Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Triangulation on secondary data Gather rich personal explanations
	Empirical data analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discourse Analysis Uses Agency Theory, Institutional theory, and SDT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharpens reliability Extracts underlying assumptions In-depth analysis
4	Single case report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Within-case analysis Draft case study report review by informants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharpens construct validity and measurability Builds validity Confirms, extends, and sharpens research findings
	Cross-case report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cross-case pattern search using divergent techniques Comparison with existing literature Ultimate research findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhances validity Raises theoretical level Contributes to generalisability Implications for theoretical development and media policymaking

Table 4-2. The Case Study Protocol

This case study protocol is adapted from published frameworks by Eisenhardt (1989b) and Maimbo and Pervan (2005), combined with the specific needs of this study. By utilising a four-stage research design illustrated above, this study combines multiple qualitative methods to collect and analyse data in this process, including document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and discourse analysis. The choice of methods also carefully considers Yin's (2009) four-test tactics, i.e., *construct validity*, *internal validity* (not a major concern for qualitative case studies), *external validity*, and *reliability*, to ensure the quality of the research designs. Based on this case study protocol, the next section carefully discusses each method employed in this study.

4.4 Data Collection and Analysis

As outlined in the case study protocol, this research combines *document analysis* and *semi-structured interviews* for data collection, while employing *discourse analysis* to interpret selected qualitative data. It is essential to note that observation was also considered during the research design stage. The author recognises the value of observing actual workplace behaviour to gain insights into organisational culture, beyond what is articulated by individuals. However, conducting field observations within Chinese newspaper firms presented significant challenges due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions. First, China's strict anti-epidemic policies on inbound travel make it extremely difficult for the researcher to return to China and access these firms within the constraints of time and budget. Second, during the COVID-19 pandemic in China, the political environment became increasingly sensitive, and media control obviously intensified (Zhai, 2023), making it riskier for them to accept external field research. And it has been acknowledged by some media scholars that organisations are reluctant to allow researchers direct access to their “carefully constructed public-relations front” (Deacon et al., 2021). After considering multiple factors, the author ultimately decided to forgo the observation method.

Nevertheless, without field observation, it does not mean there will not be sufficient data for cultural analysis. Instead, the combination of rich secondary data and interview data remains effective to support the objectives of this study. This section offers a clear and detailed introduction to all the methods and analysis procedures employed by this research.

4.4.1 Document Analysis

While directly accessing these selected organisations is challenging, documents that record their activities, decisions, strategies, and statements can also “tell interesting stories” (Deacon et al., 2021). Documents, whether printed or electronic, written or audio-visual, are social artefacts, produced, consumed, shared, and utilised in a socially-organised way (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004; Bowen, 2009). In this study, document analysis is the major method for collecting secondary data (Vartanian, 2010). Documentary data mainly serves three functions. Firstly, it supports “artefact analysis” to help the researcher identify and collect qualitative data from “cultural artefacts” to explore cultural phenomena. Besides, documents provide rich contextual information and background knowledge to help the researcher understand the historical roots of ownership issues, trace change and development, and extract meanings behind documented information to develop empirical knowledge on

the research topics (Bowen, 2009). Thirdly, documents provide a certain degree of basic knowledge for the researcher to develop adequate and effective interviewing questions to ensure the interview quality and data interpretation. Due to its advantages in providing context and background, this method is employed at first as a basis for the following data collection and analysis.

Documentary Data Collection. Documents take various forms and versions (Bowen, 2009; Karppinen and Moe, 2012). This study selects the following types of documents as necessary data for analysis, and all documents are electronically accessible and not limited to written forms:

- **Basic introductive materials:** Official webpages; organisations' social media pages; organisational structure graphs; organisational statements; organisations' annual reports.
- **Organisations' news and documents:** press releases; records of awards and punishments; strategy statements; published marketing articles, images, radio recordings and videos; documented representations of employee and manager activities.
- **Third-party documents:** public government databases and reports; credible database of Chinese companies; news coverages.
- **Supplemental materials:** documents that contribute to filling gaps and supplementing analysis following the research stage, such as those helping to interpret interview data.

When searching for documents, the authenticity, credibility, accuracy, and representativeness of the selected documents are considered (Bowen, 2009). Also, the purpose of producing the selected document is also examined by the author to avoid biased data interpretation. The author prioritises the quality of documents instead of the quantity of selected documents. When selected documents can sufficiently cover and satisfy the research needs, the collection is considered enough. Finally, the author collected a total of **812** documents:

1. **203 organisational documents** for analysis of each case (allocation for each case shown in Table 4-3).
2. **508 digital news articles** published by three newspaper firms on the *WeChat* platform in December 2022(details for comparison in Table 5-2).
3. **35 policy documents** for reviewing China's media convergence policies.

4. **66 policy documents** for examining China's regulatory contexts of media ownership, market access, and digital news regulations.

All selected documents were imported into the *NVivo* software to build “a case study database” (Yin, 2009). For data gaps, interviews are used to supplement missing variables.

Case No.	Paper Title	The Number of Selected Documents
1	China Energy News (CEN)	72
2	China Electric Power News (CEPN)	74
3	State Grid News (SGN)	57

Table 4-3. The Number of Documents Selected for Each Case's Data Analysis

Documentary Data Analysis. A central task in analysing documents is “tracking discourse”, i.e., following certain themes, words, and frames, across different issues and media (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010). Any meaningful symbolic behaviours that act in the medium of language are considered a “discourse” (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000; Brown et al., 1983). The current study employs *discourse analysis* as the main analysis method to decode collected data to extract underlying meanings. For example, the researcher may track the discourse of “product and service” and “innovation” to interpret what and why products and services are discussed as “innovation”. Through reading, looking, and interpreting (Bowen, 2009), the researcher picked “evidence” from multiple documentary sources (artefacts) and extracted the common beliefs, values, and assumptions from “meanings” within the selected artefacts (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010). The coding process started with the logic of organisational culture analysis and then developed a coding framework combined with interviewing data analysis. The coding process has been outlined in the next subsection.

This research method also presents several challenges. First, insufficient detail and an unbalanced amount of documents for each case limit a comprehensive understanding of each case (Bowen, 2009; Yin, 2011). Second, documents are unlikely to be neutral, since they are all carrying specific values from the document producers (Karppinen and Moe, 2012). To tackle the identified issues, the study collects documents from multiple reliable sources, and the author carefully evaluates the underlying interests of the document creators. Furthermore, rather than solely relying on what documents state, this study further has added the data collection for evaluating “what they do” to provide triangulation for research findings. Lastly, interviews, which are discussed in the next subsection, not only utilise informants to adjust the findings from the document analysis but also generate essential empirical data to fill in the information gap identified by document analysis.

4.4.2 Semi-structured Interviews

As a common qualitative research method in the field of organisational studies and media-specific studies, the semi-structured interview has been employed in this study to adjust the findings from document analysis and provide detailed and in-depth attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and thoughts from the organisational members to decode cultures. Interviews are conducted after document analysis since the development of questions for interviews are based on the findings from the documents and information gaps identified from document analysis. This method effectively assists the author in gathering empirical data from informants related to the research topic, as well as in triangulating other data sources and validating the findings (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019).

Interview Data Collection. Given the identified research questions and objectives, sampling for participants of interviews mainly considers the availability of participation, the willingness to participate, and the degree of lived experiences related to the research topics (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019). Compared to a large sample size, this study prioritises the quality of samples, since the in-depth understanding of research topics is the central task. The convenience sampling method was employed at first to recruit informants from the first case, CEN, since the author has a strong connection with this firm. However, the researcher has a weak connection with the other two cases. Thus, snowball sampling (Handcock and Gile, 2011) is further employed in this study to request informants from CEN, to help recruit participants for CEPN and SGN.

Additionally, the current study also recruited interviewees who have close business connections as advertisers with three selected newspaper titles. Surprisingly, there are not many studies on media organisations or media innovations that seek viewpoints from subjects who have business cooperation with the news organisation being studied. This study argues that opinions from advertisers and any other cooperative partners can also provide valuable information, such as experiences in cooperation with the organisation's members and evaluations of newspaper innovations. This study successfully recruited **16** interviewees (see Appendix 1), presenting varied positions related to the selected newspaper organisations, including journalists and editors from both the print and digital departments, business personnel from commercial departments, administrative professionals and external advertisers.

It is important to note that the author faced significant challenges in accessing potential informants during the early stages of recruitment, as this period coincided with the sensitive

context of the COVID-19 pandemic in China. Some informants who declined to be interviewed commonly indicated that the research topic on state ownership is sensitive and closely related to China's politics. They expressed concerns that revealing certain realities about their employers, or authorities might lead to trouble. Participants in the current study also voiced concerns about being penalised for sharing their true thoughts and feelings about the chosen organisations, leaders, and media policies, especially if those comments were negative. Therefore, privacy protection for informants is crucial to building trust between them and the author, ensuring a sense of security and ultimately improving the credibility of their responses during the interviews.

Each participant has been offered a Participant Information Statement and Consent Form (see Appendix 2 and 3) to request their consent and confidentiality (Raworth et al., 2012). Each of them was initially asked whether they preferred to conceal their names and other identifying information. Those who chose anonymity were assigned a distinctive code (e.g., A1). In addition to protecting their names, this study also ensures the anonymity of each participant regarding gender, position, and any other information that could reveal their identities. However, two interviewees chose to retain ownership of their viewpoints, using either pseudonyms or their real names. Although the specific occupations of each informant are not disclosed, each participant has at least five years of experience either within the newspaper organisation or in the industry as an advertiser, with most holding positions above the middle level of the organisational hierarchy. In other words, nearly all of them have extensive personal experience with the dynamics of newspaper practice and industry contexts. Therefore, the interviews with these participants are considered trustworthy and provide valuable data for the current study.

After obtaining ethical approval (No. 100210165) from the *College of Arts, University of Glasgow*, in August 2022, the researcher began initial contact with participants. This included requesting consent, introducing the study, and discussing their preferences for the timing and method of the interviews (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019). All interviews were conducted between November 2022 and September 2023, with each session limited to one hour. Given the context of COVID-19, most interviews ($N=14$) were conducted online, using methods such as voice calls (*WeChat* and *MS Teams*), writing emails, and instant messaging applications (*WeChat*), depending on the participant's preference. After China lifted its COVID-19 restrictions, the researcher also conducted two in-person interviews in Beijing in the summer of 2023.

Another significant preparation before conducting interviews is constructing the interview guide, i.e., a structured list of questions to guide the interviews and allow follow-up questions in the conversation (Raworth et al., 2012). Questions were developed based on the findings from document analysis and driven by research questions and objectives. All questions strive to be neutral, clear, easy to understand and avoid leading language (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019). Utilising the framework of interview question construction by DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), the study drafted four types of questions in the interview:

- **Opening Questions:** questions to initiate the interview and encourage interviewees to begin talking about their experience. For example, *what was your experience in cooperating with this newspaper like? What impression do their employees make on you (for advertisers)?*
- **Core Questions:** questions that are directly linked to the research objectives to help participants talk openly about the research issue in an exploratory manner. For example: *How would you describe the culture of this newspaper firm and why?*
- **Planned follow-up questions:** questions are prepared to obtain more details. For example, *what parts of the innovation practice do you dislike and how would you suggest for improvement?*
- **Unplanned follow-up questions:** questions are not prepared but popped up during the interviewing process. For example, *you mentioned that your company made a great effort in the data business. How is the data business going so far? Is it turning into a profit?*

Participants from different organisations were interviewed with different questions, given their different experiences and positions. During the interviews, the researcher took notes about valuable information and constructive thoughts inspired by the informants (Morse and Field, 1995). A good record of memos is essential for enhancing the quality of subsequent interviews (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019) and supplementing the interview data collection. As interviewees are Chinese speakers, the major communication language used in the interviews, initial contacts, and follow-up contacts is Chinese/Mandarin. All data generated in the process of conducting interviews, including transcripts, written and audio records of contacts and communication, and researchers' memos, is all recorded into the software *NVivo* to assist in data organising, managing, and analysing.

Interview Data Analysis. *Discourse analysis* was employed for interview data analysis, and further integrated with document data analysis. First, the researcher read and cleaned the data, reducing it to focus on key discourses related to “organisational culture”, “media ownership”, and “media innovation” (Roulston, 2014). Based on this reduced dataset, an

umbrella list of themes was developed to aid in categorising the data (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019). During the coding process, attention was given to identifying where organisational values, beliefs, assumptions, and their relations to ownership and digital adaptation experiences were either implicitly or explicitly mentioned (Deacon et al., 2021). Through an iterative process, the coding and categorisation framework was refined, resulting in a finalised framework that guided the findings (see Table 4-4).

Research Interest	Umbrella Themes	Codes Examples
Organisational Culture	Self-Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of State Media • Compliance Culture • Political Mobilisation and Propaganda • Valuing Industrial Newspaper
	Priority Rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political Safety • Organisational Evaluation System • Response to Policy and Regulation • External Intervention • Sensing Risks and Uncertainty
	Journalistic Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicts between Digital and Print Tasks • Experienced Changes • Attitudes and Experience of Media Convergence Policy • Journalistic Role of Public Opinion Supervision
	Commercial Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of Financial Crisis • External Evaluation • Interaction between Journalists, Commercial Personnels, and Advertisers
Media Ownership	State Ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Arrangement • Owner Right in Practice • Perceived Relations with the State
	Agent Owners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional Interests • Perceived Political Impact • Perceived Economic Impact • Perceived Ideological Impact
Media Innovation	Experiencing Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narratives for Innovation Statement • Sensing Uncertainty • Strategical Response
	Evaluating Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criteria Determination • Emotions • Expectations • Personal Experience
	Motive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-drive • Compliance • Change Averse

Table 4-4. The Code Category Framework

By successively analysing and formulating the analysis result of each case study, the researcher further combined the three case studies to generate the cross-case report (Yin, 2011). The final findings from the cross-case studies are presented in the following three chapters, each addressing one of the sub-research questions. Before discussing the research findings, the ethical considerations and limitations of this study are addressed in the following section.

4.5 Ethical Consideration and Limitations

This study has rigorously followed ethical considerations regarding the semi-structured interviews. To protect the participants' rights and to avoid any harm, all the collected data are strictly confidential and anonymous as per the interviewees' wishes. The study did not collect any interview data until the researcher obtained Ethical Approval. Participant Information Statements and Consent Forms for participation were provided to participants before starting each interview. The former introduces the current study, including what will happen if they participate, do they have to take part, what are the possible risks of participating, what are the benefits of participating, how are their data handled, and contact information to protect their rights. The latter allows the interviewee to ensure they have been informed adequately about the research and give their (electronically) signed consent to this study. Further, the author also created a data management plan to guide and regulate the data collection, protection, and presentation of this study.

As stated, many participants did not want to show their names in the study or the future published works to cause any potential harm, this was a significant challenge for the author in presenting data in this thesis. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher has the responsibility to protect the participants' privacy and remove and modify any personal and identifiable information of the participants in the research. The researcher stayed alert to examine any possibilities in concealing the participants' identity, such as quoting content with guessable information about the participant's specific position in that organisation. Information like this was modified and blurred to avoid such specifics. Some interviewees preferred to reveal their names and identities to maintain ownership of their viewpoints. As a result, the author has carefully balanced the need for anonymity with respect for each interviewee's preferences.

The current study's methodology undeniably presents a range of challenges and limitations. One significant challenge is data quality. Documents collected online may vary in reliability, and interviewees may sometimes provide responses that are biased or cautious. To ensure the quality of data collection, the researcher carefully selected documents and designed interview questions. The second concern is potential bias in both documents and interviewees' personal experiences and thoughts, especially given the relatively small sample size. Thus, the author kept rigorous when assessing discourse in the data and used a triangulation approach to collect data from multiple sources and conduct follow-up interviews. The third challenge is recruiting participants. Newspaper practitioners expressed

concerns about sensitive topics, leading some to decline participation. This suggests that interviewees' trust in the author was crucial to their decision to participate. Consequently, the use of snowball sampling proved effective in reducing the suspicion of interviewees.

Lastly, the role of the author in this research has been critically considered. As mentioned, the author's former experience in this industry can work constructively to have an in-depth understanding of the data but can also have a strong influence and impressions on interpreting the data based on her previous assumptions. To keep integrity, the author has been highly aware of this hazard and keeps a neutral standpoint as a researcher to avoid any pre-assumptions before and during data collection and analysis. In addition, by adhering to the five core principles of research integrity outlined in the University of Glasgow's *Code of Good Practice in Research*, the author has maintained transparency, honesty, rigour, openness, and accountability of the research and respect for interviewees and potential stakeholders.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter begins with re-clarifying the research questions and objectives to guide a clear route for research design. It outlines the main research strategy, a conceptual framework for research design, and the detailed research methods for data collection and analysis. Additionally, ethical consideration has been discussed in the last section, followed by indicating the multiple challenges that the researcher had been facing within the research process. The next chapter will present key findings related to the first research question, on the shared and differentiated organisational cultures among Chinese newspaper organisations.

5 State-owned Newspaper Cultures in China

This chapter addresses the first research question by examining the shared and distinct organisational culture phenomena among three selected Chinese newspaper firms: CEN, CEPN, and SGN. A discourse analysis of interview data and public documents reveals stable, China-specific cultural commonalities at the organisational level, while each firm also exhibits cultural nuances shaped by its individual growth trajectory. In addition to outlining the cultural phenomena observed across the three cases, this chapter explores the underlying formation logic behind these cultures using relevant data and examples.

5.1 Cultural Commonalities

This section is organised into three main dimensions identified from the collected data to draw descriptive conclusions about the shared culture in the three selected cases. This section comprises not an exhaustive account, but a selection of cultural phenomena in the Chinese newspaper industry due to the limited data and multifaceted nature of organisational cultures. The cultural elements involved in each dimension may not be fully generalised or comprehensive enough to draw a complete picture. Nevertheless, the cultural phenomena observed across the following three dimensions provide rich insights into the unwritten rules governing Chinese state media firms, particularly specialised newspapers, and deepen our understanding of the rationale behind their cultural similarities.

5.1.1 Identification as State Media

Every newspaper in China is embedded in the Chinese political system at its birth, generating its organisational identity and status following the administrative level of the supervisory unit to which it belongs (Stockmann, 2013). The authority relationships among newspapers, supervisors/sponsors, and the central authority, as illustrated in Figure 5-1, can be viewed as a miniature representation of the broader authority structure of Chinese press management throughout China.

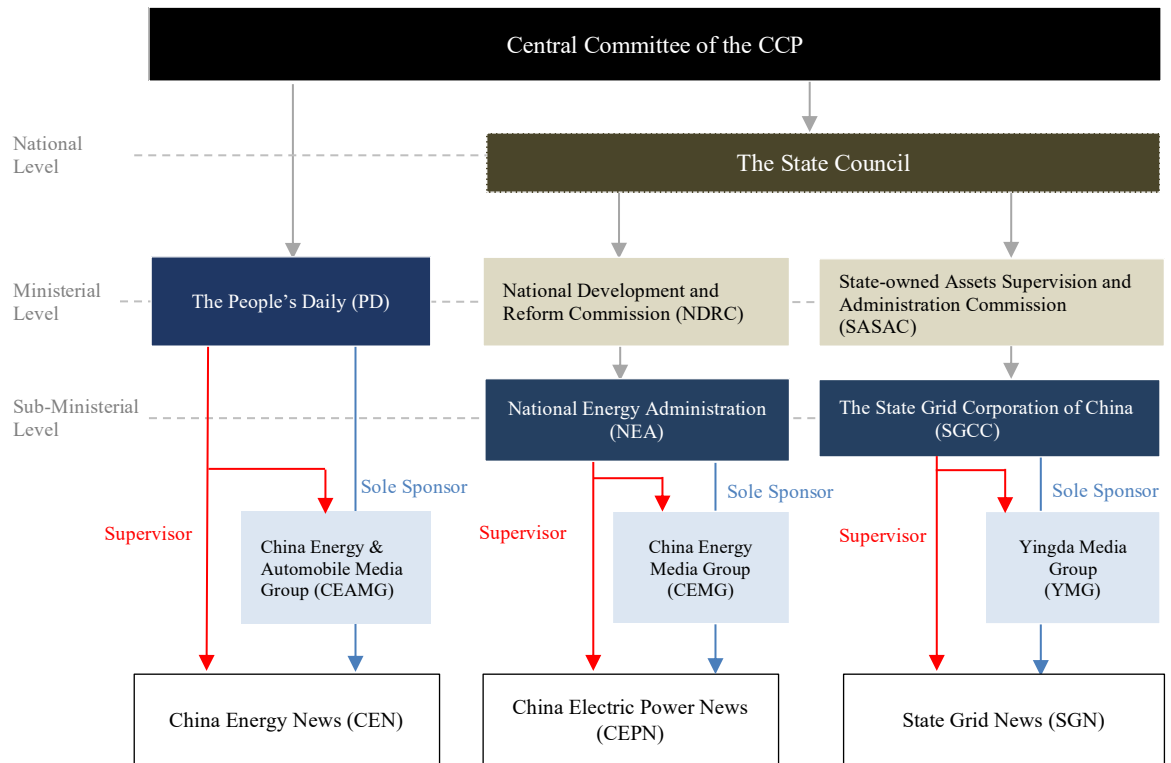


Figure 5-1. A Hierarchical Relationship Map Among the State, Supervisory/Sponsor Entities, Media Groups, and Newspaper Titles (Source: Author's Own Design)

From a macro point of view, the authority structure of China is replicated from top to bottom level by level (Zhou, 2010), resulting in a stable and solid state-media system that serves the central authority. In sociology and political science, *authority* refers to the power enabling one's ability to make the object voluntarily submit to one's will based on the beliefs in their legitimacy (Weber, 1978). The current study argues that all three selected paper titles not only firmly acknowledge and respect the legitimacy of the central authority but also attach great importance to establishing and maintaining their own authoritativeness as state-level media to ensure their credibility and reputation are not compromised. This is evident from their organisational statements (see Table 5-1): three paper titles, CEN, CEPN, and SGN, all assume themselves as having the primary responsibility of disseminating authoritative information *on behalf of the state*, such as promoting state policies, conveying the Party's decisions and guidance, or disseminating verified industry dynamics.

Paper Titles	Identity Statement	Core Value/Mission Statement
CEN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An energy industry and economic newspaper hosted by PD, a platform for information dissemination to serve state energy strategy, policies, and macro-management. China's first economic newspaper, comprehensively covering and serving the entire energy industry chain (CEAMG, n.d.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Loyalty to national interests, respect for professionalism and harmony" (2006-2022). "Loyalty to national interests, promoting energy revolution" (From 2022)⁴.
CEPN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The only official newspaper of the national energy and power industry in China. Now under the supervision of NEA, serving as an important publicity window of NEA. An authoritative platform for industry propaganda, reporting, and information dissemination, possessing a more authoritative voice and influence in the industry (CEMG, n.d.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adhere to the editorial policy of "authoritative, comprehensive, and interpretive". Supports the decision-making deployment of the CCP and the State Council on energy reform and development. Serves the central work of the NEA. Serves the development of energy industry and energy enterprises (CEMG, n.d.).
SGN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The official newspaper of SGCC. An organ of the Party Committee of SGCC (Ma, 2010). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upholds the correct guidance of public opinion and publicises the principles and policies of the CCP and the state. Builds authoritativeness as SGCC's official newspaper. Effectively publicises and implements the decisions and plans of SGCC. Conveys the voice of the SGCC Party group to every employee (Ma, 2010).

Table 5-1. Comparison of Organisational Statements Among Three Newspaper Titles

By observing organisational activities in the three cases, this research notices a frequent occurrence of political and ideological education rituals led by top leaders within the newspaper firms. Based on the document data, each newspaper's top leader also serves as organisational Party Secretary to ensure the Party's control of both editorial and commercial departments. Political rhetoric, such as "firmly adhere to the principle of Party Spirit (党性原则)⁵" and "insist politicians run newspapers (政治家办报)⁶", commonly appeared in their leaders' speeches, annual reports, reportages of their organisation-based activities (e.g., Party-theme events and Party educational courses). The *synchronisation* shared by the three newspaper firms illustrates their similar ritualised approach to producing *symbolic compliance* in alignment with the central authority's ideology (Zhou, 2010; 2022). One pseudonymous interviewee tagged "red culture"⁷ to explain the increasingly frequent ritualisation of political activities they have observed in the past a few years, including

⁴ CEN's shift in core values from "Harmony" to "Promote energy revolution" illustrates its alignment with the evolving central ideology of the CCP. The former value reflects the "Harmonious Society" concept introduced in 2004, while the latter aligns with President Xi Jinping's recent push for revolutionary energy policies since 2022, highlighting CEN's adaptability to the political landscape.

⁵ "Party Spirit," a term derived from Marxism-Leninism, refers to the ideological principles and directives of the Communist Party.

⁶ A slogan proposed by Mao Zedong, requiring news workers should view themselves as politicians to examine social events and do their day-to-day journalistic works to loyally practice the Party's political path.

⁷ Red culture refers to the advanced culture uniquely created by the CCP and Chinese people during the revolutionary and wartime eras. This culture serves as a vehicle for the CCP to promote its ideology and values, playing a crucial role in the party's identity and propaganda efforts.

formal meetings and employee training for the Party's political construction (Judy, 19 November 2022, online).



Figure 5-2. Red Culture Activity at SGN⁸ (Source: SGN, 2019)

In their editorial policies, newspapers may prioritise coverage space to integrate ritualised political propaganda into news editorial planning and publishing. This practice is particularly evident in CEPN and SGN, as reflected in their organisational statements in Table 5-1, which emphasise their role in serving the CCP. For example, CEPN combines the Party ceremonies with industry topics (see Figure 5-3) by launching a large-scale, multi-platform news initiative titled “Viewing China along the Energy Channels.” This initiative aims to showcase “the practices and thoughts of the energy industry’s loyalty and commitment to Party’s leadership” while illustrating “why Marxism is effective”, “why China’s socialism is good”, and “why the Party is capable and successful” (Fan, 2022a). The campaign integrates themes like “the Centenary of the Founding of CCP” and “China’s Energy Channel Construction”, featuring 27 headline articles and 36 issues of multi-platform media reports based on field research across 11 provinces in China (Fan, 2022b). Similar editorial decisions are also found in the other two newspapers, despite with slight variations in perspective and reporting frequency.

⁸ A self-organised serving team of 23 Party members from SGN to demonstrate the exemplary role of Party members in SGCC and show the loyalty and responsibility of the SGCC members.



Figure 5-3. Integrating the Party Culture into News Practice by CEPN (Source: CEMG, 2022)

This study suggests that integrating CCP ideology with reporting agendas has become one acceptable norm shared by state media organisations due to the long-term indoctrination and training through organisational activities. This extended immersion in the Party and State cultural indoctrination has shaped professionals' beliefs and assumptions: first, they have embraced the Party's values and priorities; second, they have internalised the assumption that the Party and State's backing inherently guarantees certain advantages and stability. Although industry newspapers are not officially designated as Party organs, their organisational practice still commonly adopt and practice these norms. This indicates that the influence of CCP ideology extends beyond officially designated Party media to other state media organisations as well.

Additionally, this study notices that interviewees generally share the belief that media outlets closely tied to central power are seen as more authoritative and impactful. This contrasts with Western evaluations of media credibility, which emphasise journalistic autonomy and independence from state power (Lauk and Harro-Loi, 2017; Sjøvaag, 2013). In China, where central authority is widely accepted and respected (Zhou, 2022), the public often evaluates a news outlet's authoritativeness (权威性), credibility and influence based on its official

background (Zhang et al., 2014). During the interviews, both newspaper employees and advertisers preferred to use the informal categorical label, *Guozitou* (国字头), which roughly means those newspaper firms with “China” in their paper title. This term distinguishes state media outlets which possess a nationally authoritative level of status and influence from others.

However, it is essential to note that, although SGN is a national newspaper, many interviewees from CEN and CEPN suggested SGN is not perceived as authoritative as the other two titles. One interviewee suggested,

“SGN mainly represents SGCC, without sufficient capability to stand in the perspective of the entire industry to guide public opinion” (Interviewee A7, 23 December 2022, Online).

This perception indicates that a state-owned newspaper’s authoritativeness can also be influenced by its specific affiliations and the extent to which it can represent a broader and diverse perspective.

Moreover, interviewees associate the perceived authoritativeness and credibility of a news outlet with the assumption that such evaluations are recognised not only by press practitioners but also by the public:

“Due to the institutional characteristics in our country, ordinary people often unconsciously trust officially certified media outlets more” (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

“The public usually acquiesces to the fact that what is published by official press is inherently authoritative, accurate and reliable” (Interviewee A5, 19 November 2022).

This aligns with the recent research finding that official media are perceived as the most credible news sources in China (Xu et al., 2024). It also supports earlier findings that top official media in China enjoy a higher level of public trust compared to other news content providers, such as online platforms (Zhang et al., 2014). However, this contradicts other findings suggesting that an official background undermines media trust due to its role as a mouthpiece for government propaganda and its limited representation of public opinion in China (Stockmann, 2013). The inconsistency may arise from variations in research contexts, data collected, and the factors influencing media trust perceptions in China. Despite these

inconsistencies, interviews with advertisers further demonstrate their recognition of the value associated with state media labels:

“We can understand those *Guozitou* news media as ‘Official Army’ of the state, formally trained and having priority access to better resources” (Interviewee A1, 8 November 2022, Online).

This quote highlights the use of metaphor to portray *Guozitou* media as more credible and trusted, likening them to an “Official Army” with formal training and priority access to resources. This interviewee also confirmed that the level of authoritativeness is one of the most important *criteria* when selecting media partners:

“The industrial media that we are willing to cooperate with are all influential and authoritative in this [energy] industry, and these media organisations are all *Guozitou* newspapers, and their backgrounds and the platforms they provide often carry more importance [than other media] ... we feel a sense of security when cooperating with these *Guozitou* media outlets” (Interviewee A1, 16 November 2022, Online).

This suggests that advertisers in China’s energy sector have internalised the belief that state-owned, authoritative news media provide not only visibility but also legitimacy and security. With this mutually recognised belief, *Guozitou* newspaper firms are considered as not easily being challenged by online platforms, fostering a sense of confidence and stability by newspaper professionals in their standing within both the marketplace and China’s media system:

“I think our position is irreplaceable. We represent the official and the mainstream public opinion. While the commercial digital media platforms are incomparable to us” (Interviewee A8, 21 December 2022, Online).

“I even feel popular digital media platforms will not keep steady and secure in China’s context; possibly they may be acquired by official media someday if they grow bigger and bigger” (Interviewee A7, 23 November 2022, Online).

“The overall impact [of the rise of digital media] is not that significant; various resources remain concentrated in the entities with a state background” (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

These comments reflect their sense of superiority and self-assuredness about state media’s position, and this possibly contains their subjective bias towards the advantages of *Guozitou* Media. Although these views may lack a comprehensive perspective on the media landscape, they provide valuable insights into how current practitioners in China’s newspaper industry evaluate the status of state press.

Undoubtedly, it is impossible that all Chinese newspaper permanently secures a comfortable position in the marketplace. Their shared sense of stability identified by this study could be their subjective notion. In fact, there were cases of *Guozitou* newspapers in China that shut down, such as *China Press Journal* (中华新闻报) in 2009, due to “poor management” (Tian, 2009). Despite official backing, the survival of Chinese newspaper firms also depends on factors such as the economic conditions of their target sectors, clear market positioning, and the ability to adapt to changes. However, what this study is focusing on here is their underlying assumption—their belief that the official background that state media hold, has brought them prestige, status, and a guarantee of survival. And it is surprising that their understanding of a newspaper’s market positioning and brand values is primarily derived from its hierarchical status within the political system, rather than from its position in market competition. This shared approach to evaluating Chinese news outlets among newspaper members and external advertisers has further strengthened their perception of state media’s authority and reliability.

5.1.2 Uncertainty Behind Symbolic Compliance

According to public documents and interviews, this study found *homogeneity* in three newspaper organisations’ responses to digitalisation. Media convergence, a buzzword capturing the ongoing trend of the media landscape, has been utilised by China’s central authority to name a state-guided innovation strategy, i.e., media convergence national strategy, with a set of standards and goals (see Section 3.2). More importantly, these standards have been written into regulation documents by NPPA to require each newspaper supervisor to annually self-examine and report to the authority regarding each newspaper firm’s progress in “Converging Media Construction (融媒体建设)” (NPPA, 2023b). Thus, this study notices a homogeneous behaviour in building the state-directed “Converging Media Matrix (融媒体矩阵)” (see Figure 5-4), combining multi-platform media content production and distribution to maximise their dissemination effect. The logic behind matrix construction is the same: they adopt and utilise the communication affordances of existing popular digital platforms as much as possible to enhance their digital communication power.

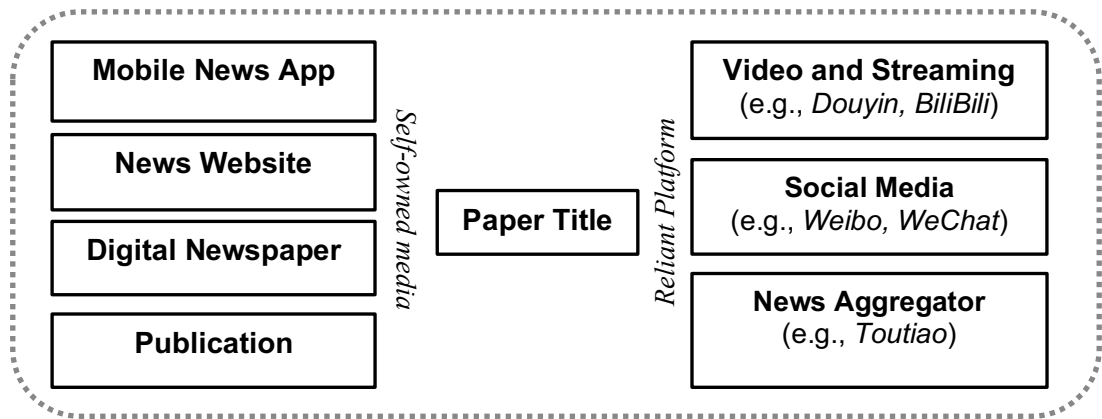


Figure 5-4. A Typical Model of Converging Media Matrix of Chinese Newspaper Firm
(Source: Author's Own Design)

However, some newspaper practitioners did not express confidence in the outcomes of building Converging Media Matrix. As one interviewee noted:

“Anything related to media convergence is encouraged and supported in our firm, but we now just borrow their platforms to do our old things. Relying on this approach, we hardly solve the real problems, and I’m not confident about this. This is going to be a tough road for us” (Interviewee A6, 21 November 2022, Online).

For newspaper professionals, the Converging Media Matrix has expanded content delivery channels but has not fundamentally changed how they produce and monetise content. As shown in Figure 5-4, many of these Matrix channels rely on external platforms like *Weibo*, *WeChat*, and *Douyin*, rather than being independently owned. This dependence on external online platforms introduces vulnerability, such as reduced control over traffic monetisation and a passive role in following platform policies and algorithm rules. Despite these concerns, Chinese newspapers have uniformly adopted and promoted the Converging Media Matrix strategy.

In addition, three newspaper firms have homogenised their approach to restructuring newsroom processes by imitating the successful example set by PD—the Central-Kitchen Model (see Section 3.2)—to align with media convergence policy. Based on interviews, this study suggests that the three newspapers have similarly re-structured their newsrooms into more integrated departments, functioning like a centralised kitchen to promote “single collection, multi-version production, multi-channel dissemination”. However, again, media practitioners also lack motivation and confidence in its potential positive outcomes:

“We restructured our newsroom by integrating all journalists and editors from different departments into one department. But the actual outcome is hard to

predict. At least now, we hardly achieved our expected result. Because although we have a united news centre, it is still split into different minor teams in charge of websites, social media publishing, and newspaper. Everybody does their own things” (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

“Although the current media convergence situation appears integrated...In reality, various systems are loosely connected. The higher-ups said we must achieve media convergence, but what is the actual goal specifically? I really have no idea” (Interviewee A14, 19 September 2023, Online).

This study observes that the synchronous involvement of the three newspaper firms in the current media convergence campaign—whether through uniformly establishing multimedia matrices or restructuring newsrooms—reflects a form of symbolic compliance with national strategic directives. This is because the interviews reveal that they generally did not believe media convergence will truly bring about significant innovations; they remained sceptical about the actual outcome of this national strategy when commenting. This study argues that Chinese newspaper professionals tend to hold their underlying assumption that the so-called Converging Media Construction is more of a symbolic gesture than a transformative force.

More importantly, there is a conflicting cultural phenomenon where journalists’ lack of motivation for digital tasks contrasts with digital departments’ complaints about being undervalued within the newspaper organisation. As illustrated above, due to the ambiguity of the actual outcomes that arise from converging media practice, journalists still prioritise newspaper-related tasks, and resources are naturally tilted towards newspaper-related works. As interviewee A4 highlighted,

“Honestly, many newspaper editors and journalists are well capable of writing great digital-tailored news reports to post first on digital platforms. But they are just reluctant. They prefer reserving their news to the newspapers, as publishing online is not guaranteed with salary rewards. If the report is published in the newspaper, they will get their desired payment. Only when the viewing traffic of digital reportage exceeds 100,000 the journalist and editor can get 10,000 RMB cash rewards. But the number of views online is too difficult to predict, so there is much uncertainty. People tend to go for the tasks that will ensure certain reward” (Interviewee A4, 12 November, Online).

Although cash rewards have become a common method for newspaper firms to motivate journalists to prioritise digital reporting, journalists interviewed in this study were unimpressed by this approach due to perceived uncertainty. Besides the lack of a clear mechanism for communicating benefits to internal members, interviewees from digital departments reported experiences of “unfair treatment”. First, interviewees who worked for

digital departments highlighted that they have a significantly limited number of staff to develop and improve digital tasks. One interviewee suggested:

“The so-called converging media department is still dominated by ‘the newspaper people’, only 10% of people from this integrated department are digital editors” (Interviewee A5, 19 November 2022, Online).

In addition to a shorthanded condition for digital growth, multiple interviewees suggest that news resources remain to be concentrated in the hands of newspaper journalists. Interviewee A3 suggest:

“We don’t have the core resources needed for sourcing news and producing quality content, which significantly limits our capabilities...; These resources have been dominated by newspaper journalists for many years, making it very difficult for us to access them, and they have no obligation to share with us” (Interviewee A3, 12 November 2022, Online).

However, there were a few journalists at these newspaper firms proactively participating with digital staff to co-produce digital news or even cross-media content. Interviewee A3 further suggested that, in most cases, those collaborations between the digital and the traditional journalists were still in a random manner and lacked continuity. Furthermore, digital teams shared a sense of ambiguity about their actual function and responsibility within the organisational design, leading to a relatively marginalised status in newspaper firms. With continuously limited resource support and managerial attention, interviewees from the new media department expressed feeling that they were still regarded as a peripheral department within the newspaper organisation, rather than being considered a core or central team. As interviewee A5 suggested:

“I often feel that we are viewed merely as a service department. Requests come in, such as ‘We have an offline conference tomorrow; could you handle the live streaming for us?’ or ‘We have a major client who wants to be featured as a headline on the WeChat platform tomorrow; could you assist with that?’” (Interviewee A5, 19 November 2022, Online)

According to their viewpoints, the entrenched newspaper-focused values and beliefs have not been fundamentally challenged at the organisational level so far. Much input and work finished by digital teams were considered less valuable than the newspaper tasks, with limited or even no material rewards, which have been taken for granted internally. This again suggests that a lack of clear re-assessment and recognition of the value of digital products and services has bred a collective sense of *ambiguity* in its digital transition.

As a result, this study argues that, despite the proactively symbolic implementation of the state-led media convergence strategy, Chinese newspaper professionals face an unresolved mismatch between prevailing cultural values and the desired changes. Their underlying assumptions view digital tasks as *uncertain* regarding outcomes and benefits. This phenomenon underscores a cultural clash and adaptation challenge underlying their symbolic involvement in media convergence efforts.

5.1.3 Commercial Cultures

While public interest should remain the priority for journalistic institutions, pursuing economic benefits is inevitable for newspaper firms, given their nature as enterprises. In this study, both the audience and the advertisers of these three selected paper titles are primarily based in the energy sector in China. The major advertising sponsors of selected industry newspapers are often those giant SOEs which are administered and supervised by the central government (Xu, 2017). They do not only have solid economic power but also high political status. Every move of these giant energy companies can attract the industry's attention. As a result, industry media outlets inevitably rely on these actors to source news, circulation, and advertising revenues. Unlike the mass media, industry news outlets' audiences and advertisers can be highly overlapping. Some informants argued that the relatively closed nature of the energy sector in China and the news publishers' heavy reliance on the industry sources led to the closedness and low competition of the energy media market:

“There are two resources a newspaper [firm] worries about the most: one is the news, and the other is money. Some revenues for industry newspapers are tied to the internal assessment system of these big energy clients. These big clients often have a large scale. They will set assessment targets for their subsidiaries at different levels, such as how many news or branded articles they must publish on their appointed industry media outlets in one year. If these clients withdraw from these assessment systems or [change their] targets, these industry newspapers would go out of business. Therefore, we say these large clients are our ‘moneybags’, and we cannot break our own ‘rice bowl’. Industry newspapers have boxed themselves in the industry and could only exist relying on the industrial actors” (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

This comment highlights the fundamental vulnerability of industry newspapers to major interest groups in the energy sector. The heavy dependence of industry newspapers on industrial clients and sponsors—particularly large SOEs that control industry discourse—has, to some extent, weakened their journalistic independence and constrained their development opportunities. One interviewee stressed:

“We have one inertial thinking that we must serve for the industry [actors]. I don’t think we are pure news outlets. We often have limited space to conduct critical news because one of our motivations is to serve the industry [clients] to have revenues” (Interviewee A6, 21 November 2022, Online).

As a result, industry newspapers hardly balance well their societal role between being a political mouthpiece, a commercial tool, and a public watchdog position. Due to the dual dependence on political and economic factors, there is a common phenomenon: three newspaper firms often exhibit obvious state-interest and market-interest orientations but neglect the public interest (Zhou, 2018). In addition to their shared orientation toward serving sponsors for sourcing revenues, this study also finds an emerging cultural norm of co-creation between journalists and advertisers in industry news reporting, which is becoming increasingly normalised. Industry advertisers are buying more co-created “sponsored news”. Advertiser interviewee suggested,

“We hope that journalists will cover our promotional case from a news perspective... This kind of collaboration is also very cost-effective for us to purchase quality tailored content crafted by specialist journalists and editors for a specialised audience” (Interviewee A1, 8 November 2022, Online).

Interestingly, this study found that many brand managers from major sponsoring companies often used to be these state press practitioners. Consequently, they well know how to collaborate with journalists to facilitate their branded content production. Another advertiser interviewee noted:

“We try our best to provide convenience for journalists, such as organising field visits and interviews to let journalists access our top managers, industry experts, scholars, and other stakeholders, to maintain a certain level of originality and neutrality; We understand journalists also need multiple voices to present neutrality” (Interviewee A2, 6 November 2022, Online).

However, this “co-created” news coverage is not always clearly labelled as sponsored contents. And for most cases, it remains rather ambiguous to identify, hardly disclosing whether this is pure news or stories with promotional content. Advertisers interviewed in this study commonly expected “newsworthy” tailored content, which could be cleverly embedded with their desired promotional content about their corporate cases or even the corporate’s voice to influence public opinion and policymaking.

Additionally, some industry advertisers may view commercial cooperation with media outlets as a flexible means of “buying protection” (Interviewee Liu, 6 November 2022, Online)—that is, maintaining positive media relations to prevent negative coverage. This

does not imply that Chinese media engage in extortion practices; rather, the desire for “protection” stems from the advertisers’ intent to safeguard their public image. Besides formal business arrangements, advertisers seek beneficial *informal* relationships with media outlets, known as *Guanxi* (关系) in Chinese discourse (Barbalet, 2023). An interviewee from the commercial department of one newspaper firm demonstrated this intention:

“Some advertisers may seek more than just advertising services—they might also aim to leverage the newspaper’s connections to foster positive governmental relationships from us” (Interviewee A8, 21 December 2022, Online).

The informal relationships between advertisers and newspapers, as observed in this study, operate at multiple levels within newspaper organisations, from leaders to journalists. When asked how advertisers handle situations where newspapers do not meet their expectations, interviewee A2 provided an example:

“Solutions are straightforward: upgrading our requests to higher-level leaders [to deal with]. For example, if we wanted to publish one news release on the media outlets, but they refused to publish it. We may proceed to the top leader if my superior cannot handle it. Problems are usually solved when the request is mutually dealt with at the higher management level” (Interviewee A2, 6 November 2022, Online).

This case not only reveals the acceptable manner of forming informal relationships between the press and advertisers based on their commercial connections but also illustrates that, on some occasions, newspaper managers may assist and satisfy their major clients beyond the scope of business contracts, guided by mutual informal relationships. The functional prevalence of informal relationships in China aggravated the blurred operation between business and journalism in media management (Tsetsura, 2015). This study suggests that both the advertiser and the press practitioner have internalised the normalcy and legitimacy of informal relationships, as one part of their commercial cultures.

According to China’s media regulations on paid-for news, news reports and advertising must be strictly separated, and journalists are prohibited from participating in commercial activities. However, the absolute independence of journalists from commercial operations appears to be an unrealistic ideal for Chinese industry newspapers who are primarily dependent on advertising revenues. This can be demonstrated by the prevalence of envelope journalism culture in China (Xu, 2016). Whether from the organisational management perspective or at the individual level of journalists, the struggle to balance professional journalism with external interests remains ongoing. One interviewee stated:

“In fact, not only industry newspapers but almost all newspapers in China employ similar commercial practices. Newspapers need to earn publicity money for a living. But fundamentally speaking, I cannot approve of this kind of behaviour...very detrimental to the long-term development of the industry newspaper. China has clear regulations and punitive measures for separate journalism and business management. The core issue is the mis-position of these media outlets. They not only want the money but also want to exert authority. It is impossible to achieve the balance” (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

The participation of journalists in commercial activities is against journalistic professionalism as well as China’s existing regulations. However, the commercial cultures of China’s newspaper firms have increasingly intertwined with journalistic involvement. Being in a grey area between sponsored and pure news, the boundary between journalism and commercial publicity has become increasingly blurred. This struggle is not unique to China. One recent empirical research on European news outlets also highlighted the deconstruction of the traditionally divided operation of editorial and commercial teams, which has been increasingly popular as a new norm of media management across countries (Cornia et al., 2020). Furthermore, many news organisations now camouflage native advertisements as much as possible from news reports rather than keeping transparency (Ferrer-Conill et al., 2021), which also aligns with the findings of the current study. The implications of this continuing integrated culture for media management and regulations deserve further research.

5.1.4 Conclusion for Cultural Commonality

An exploration of the similar cultural phenomena among three selected Chinese industry newspapers has presented a general set of values and beliefs shared inside and outside state newspaper organisations. These values, observed within this study, mainly covered a strong recognition of authority, a weak and uncertain in-house recognition of digital transition, and a shifting role for journalists in commercial cultures. This section further sheds light on China’s specific context; the state-led media convergence campaign and specialised media marketplace are demonstrably shaping newspaper cultures. The following section further examines the cultural characteristics of each case, providing more detail for organisational culture analysis.

5.2 CEN: a Self-Reliant Culture

The first case is China Energy News (CEN), the youngest newspaper among three selected newspapers, established on 1st June 2009. What makes CEN distinctive compared to CEPN

and SGN in terms of organisational culture is their underlying beliefs and values around *autonomy*. Since CEN's establishment, the founding leader, Li Qingwen, stressed the importance of keeping a "relatively independent media stance" for the growth of industry newspapers on multiple occasions (Yuan, 2009). In his words, CEN must "stand both in and out the industry" (Yi, 2009):

"Only if a newspaper achieves a certain level of independence from governmental departmental bodies can it serve the industry from a higher and broader perspective, rather than being confined to a narrow industry focus"(Li, 2004).

The underlying belief behind CEN's founding leader is clear: industry newspapers must create news "independently from departmental interests, local interests and individual corporate interests" to some extent, to match the audience's need for valuable and authentic information (Yi, 2009).

Similarly, Fei Weiwei, the first Deputy Editor-in-Chief of CEN, who oversaw the editorial department and was an experienced journalist from PD, laid down many ground rules for CEN's news policies. His frequently mentioned trope, "see the problem from a stand on Tiananmen⁹", was still mentioned over and over by CEN's current members. This trope also conveys a media stance to capture a specific news phenomenon within the big picture to ensure news integrity (Fei, 2018). Despite the original leaders having retired or left CEN, their established rules and standards present *continuity* and *inheritance* in their organisational cultural evolution. Their beliefs in guarding a certain level of autonomy can be seen through their practice of public opinion supervision, which is the major difference compared to CEPN and SGN.

5.2.1 The Sense of Responsibility for Public Opinion Oversight

A higher level of autonomy makes critical reporting more acceptable and respected in CEN's culture. Under the top management of Jianlin¹⁰ from 2016 to 2021, reporting for public opinion supervision was notably advocated in CEN. Public opinion supervision, also known as *Yulun Jiandu* (舆论监督), has been a buzzword in China's media culture since the 1990s, which refers to using critical media reports to supervise the officials and major actors in the

⁹ Tiananmen, located in central Beijing, represents a key cultural symbol in China's state structure, emphasising that journalists should adopt a broader perspective on news issues and prioritise national interests.

¹⁰ The former president of CEN, Jianlin is a former experienced journalist and editor from PD.

society for the public interest (Zhao and Wusan, 2009). One major approach to exercising public opinion supervision by media is investigative reporting (Chen, 2017). However, China's investigative journalism has faced the edge of disappearance since 2014 (Tong, 2020). As an industry newspaper, CEN's culture in supporting investigative reporting has been positively acknowledged by its internal members. One interviewee recalled how the leader reiterated the importance of exerting the role of supervision by public opinion in meetings:

“He often reminded us ‘we must do more reporting for public opinion supervision’... This kind of reporting may infringe on some parties’ interests, but only by exposing problems can it be improved. Isn’t it better for the development of the industry and the whole society?” (Interviewee A8, 21 December 2022, Online)

Another interviewee also cherished such a culture in CEN:

“Doing public opinion supervision has been rarely seen in today’s press sector. CEN presents a relatively different environment from other general China’s media” (Interviewee A11, 18 August 2023, Beijing).

One well-known example of CEN exercising public opinion supervision is their investigative reporting on a continuing conflict over the outward transmission of hydropower from the *Baihetan* Dam in China in 2020. CEN’s investigative reporting on this issue pointed out the indecision of China’s energy regulation bodies and the continuing controversy between local interests and giant SOE’s interests, leading to a massive waste of hydropower (Zhu and Jia, 2020). One interviewee recalled the scene when the news had been sent out:

“This issue existed for a long time, but no other media outlets reported it. The local energy bureau travelled to our newspaper office specifically to talk about this matter” (Interviewee A14, 19 September 2023, Online).

When talking about this event, interviewees from CEN seemed very proud of this moment—a landmark showing where CEN truly stands. Another representative example is disclosing the scandal of officials from the NEA. In 2014, CEN exposed one former deputy director of China’s NEA who had been formerly arrested for soliciting a prostitute but still getting promoted within the NEA; this news report questioned the soil of NEA in breeding corruption (Cheng, 2014). One interviewee recalled:

“When we got the news from reliable sources, we asked the Editor-in-Chief immediately whether we could publish it. I thought it might be detrimental to the relationship with NEA...But our Editor-in-Chief said, ‘it’s totally fine to report this...we are not their [NEA] organ’” (Interviewee A3, 12 November 2022, Online).

However, such a strong culture is not always guaranteed. In 2022, a new leader came to CEN and challenged their firmly established norm and standards. As suggested by interviewee A3, this leader required all news reporting to follow the “3+2+1” principle: each news article must contain interviews and content from at least three corporates, two experts, and one official. “No meeting ‘3+2+1’ principle, no publishing,” interviewee A3 further expressed objections to such a commercial-oriented news approach:

“The aim of ‘3+2+1’ is to push journalists to connect more companies to help make money. Since then, critical news reports have been abandoned. This leader regarded writing quality news as no more important than making money” (Interviewee A3, 12 November 2022, Online).

This leadership change significantly affected the news standards of CEN. After seeing sponsored news over-occupied headlines, one expert even questioned CEN journalists “What happened to CEN?” (Interviewee A12, 18 August 2022, Online). Interestingly, five months after finishing the first stage of interviews, one internal member told the author that PD had appointed a new leader to CEN due to a collective complaint from its members towards this leader. In this case, we could see that a firmly established norm and values in news policies may be challenged by new leadership, but strong culture may also exclude such challengers from the organisation. More importantly, it is evident that the fundamental assumption in CEN’s culture is that maintaining a certain level of independence (even though complete independence is not feasible in China) is endorsed, and that self-reliance is central to the organisational ethos.

5.2.2 Dissociated Values for Digital Growth

Regarding its digital news practice, this study found that digital innovation in CEN is exercised in a relatively relaxed organisational climate—with much fewer management interventions or censorship from superior bodies compared to the other two newspapers. Compared to print news norms, CEN’s digital team diverges significantly from CEN’s conventional beliefs in news practice. The underlying logic of their digital strategies is prioritising traffic generation, pursuing timely publishing, and being unconstrained by its

industry frameworks in topic selection. This approach caters to platform algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, enabling them to reach a broader audience.

By tracking digital news reporting as a public document (or “cultural artefact”) of three newspapers’ *WeChat* accounts in the whole month of December 2022 (See Table 5-2, data collected by 27 April 2023), this study finds that CEN has evidently produced more contents with higher viewing numbers compared to the other two cases. More importantly, CEN exercised a more thoroughly differentiated strategy in digital content production from print content production compared to the other two newspapers. CEN’s digital news reporting presents *a popular taste* rather than following its traditionally restricted criterion on “hard” industry news. Besides, CEN does not always insist on complete content originality on its digital platform but prefers *flexible re-production* using existing online information and trending topics.

Case	CEN	CEPN	SGN
The Number of Published News Articles	362	141	77
Total Page views	1,717,438	156,162	241,959
Average Viewing Count per News Article	4,744	1107	3142

Table 5-2. Basic Statistics of Three Paper Titles’ *WeChat* Subscription in December 2022

Specifically, CEN’s editorial selection criteria for the digital platform have not necessarily focused only on energy-related topics but also include societal hotspots and political issues, such as popular science of COVID-19 (CEN, 2022b), anti-corruption (CEN, 2022c), and official non-energy policy releases (CEN, 2022a). Surprisingly, these topics hardly relate to the energy major but brought significant traffic to CEN’s account. Besides, CEN’s digital team did not prioritise originality but was much more traffic oriented. The interviewee explained the main reason behind such a strategy:

“[The digital department] wish to produce more original content, but they lack the necessary personnel and resources to support this” (Interviewee A3, 12 November 2022, Online).

With limited resources, they prioritised curating and presenting fresh, verified content to their audiences rather than producing entirely original material by themselves. This seems to be an alternative approach for CEN’s digital team to save time, energy, and money with limited resources to gain traffic sufficiently. When enquiring about CEN’s routines and norms for short video news production, CEN’s video news editors preferred trending topics to “entertain the viewers” and “satisfy their curiosity”. One interviewee described how digital editors selected topics each day:

“Every day, the whole team, including the chief editor [of the video department], spends much time observing and researching the hottest topics currently on multiple big platforms, such as *Baidu*, *Douyin*, and *Toutiao*. The top searched news rarely related to energy topics, and energy topics are too specialised to be popularised on social media platforms. Thus, we often combine hot topics with technology, energy, environmental focus and so on to make our short videos. After identifying the topic, we may report to the chief editor and make it after getting approvals. Generally, we can complete the short video creation and upload it in as little as 30 minutes. These [short video] platform algorithm policy encourages videos that follow the latest trends and hotspots, and [follow that] we can receive maximum traffic support by platform algorithm” (Interviewee A13, 18 August 2023, Online).

Again, this demonstrates a traffic-oriented and algorithm-pleasing path adopted by CEN’s digital team. However, not every member was impressed with the priority of traffic. Interviewee A12 noted:

“Personally, I don’t agree with their sensationalising headlines, although it really brought about traffic” (A12, 18 August 2023, Beijing).

Interviews indicated that internal members had noticed dissociated values emerging for news production in CEN. However, due to limited direct interventions from the top management, the digital team can still self-explore and experiment relatively freely. And their achievement of millions of followers on digital platforms further enhanced their beliefs and values about the effectiveness of a popularised approach. On the other hand, the limited intervention from top management was seen as a positive factor in fostering creativity and self-motivated innovations in short video production:

“We got a great extent of autonomy operating these [digital] accounts, so we basically built these accounts all by ourselves. It feels like raising my own child. Seeing the increasing numbers of followers, I have a special sense of accomplishment” (Interviewee A5, 19 November 2022, Online).

Although such a liberal policy in CEN at the organisational level helps cultivate innovation, the leadership of CEN seems to be in a wait-and-see state towards digital strategy. With limited tangible supports from the top management, interviewee A5 suggested that the digital team was experiencing a state of free self-learning and self-experimentation growth.

Overall, the cultural image of CEN has become clearer: on the premise of not touching the political red line, its indubitable beliefs in its autonomy significantly shaped an organisational culture that is now well-established and operates with solid stability. This is the most significant difference in its cultural base relative to CEPN and SGN. Also, within

a culture of valuing autonomy and self-reliance, the digital department's growth also enjoys a relatively free space for self-driven experimentation. However, the dissociated sub-culture from its established newsroom cultures exhibited in digital practice has not yet been recognised and managed by the top management. This management gap will be discussed more in Chapter 7.

5.3 CEPN: an Industry-Bound Culture

The second case, CEPN, established in 1982, is the oldest newspaper among the three and has a profound readership base. Unlike CEN and SGN, CEPN grows along with the development of China's electric power industry. This study observes that both external readers and internal members of CEPN exhibited a strong sense of mutual identification. One advertiser interviewee described how CEPN has developed into a cultural link among the electric power industry practitioners:

“CEPN is a cultural heritage of China's electric power industry that has been passed down from generation to generation. For electric power professionals, only CEPN is the top newspaper in their hearts. Not SGN and not CEN. All the pioneers who built this industry read this newspaper when they were specialised students, graduates, managers, and leaders since this was the only newspaper covering their major and work during that time. Thus, even CEPN may not be as good as before, the readers still have strong feelings attached to it” (Interviewee Liu, 6 November 2022, Online).

Indeed, CEPN has been rooted in China's electric power industry with a steady readership base for forty years. When asking internal members from CEPN to reflect on its organisational culture, they were similarly proud of their well-established linkage with the electric power industry. However, along with China's electric power system reform, CEPN has undergone multiple changes in its supervising entities. The most recent change is the restructuring of the regulatory bodies of the energy industry and the electric power industry in 2013 when CEPN became the official newspaper of NEA and started to serve its dual role as an industry newspaper and organ newspaper. A shift from serving the industry to an added role of “serving the central work of NEA” (Fan, 2022b) also has significantly impacted its newsroom culture and strategic position.

5.3.1 “Report Good News, Not Bad News.”

Although all three selected cases view themselves as serving the industry, there is a significant contrast in their organisational acceptance of critical reporting and their collective

understanding of its role in public opinion supervision. Due to its well-established connection to the entire electric power industry, CEPN is closest to the source of quality information compared to CEN and SGN. As interviewee A3 suggested:

“People in the electric power industry are structured into a pyramid. CEN helps you connect with its top. However, compared to CEPN, CEN lacks both the breadth and depth of connections in the people resources it has access to” (Interviewee A3, 12 November 2022, Online).

An advertiser interviewee further mentioned:

“CEPN holds rich sources and exclusive information that can be produced for making excellent investigative news. Still, critical reportage is often hard to be published in CEPN” (Interviewee Liu, 6 November 2022, Online).

Due to much stricter censorship and entrenched attachment to the industry, CEPN has developed one underlying assumption on news selection and reporting, i.e., preferring to positively guide public opinion and avoid critical news reporting. One internal member selected one Chinese proverb, “Report good news, not bad news” (报喜不报忧), to highlight the entrenched values commonly seen in news production in the electric power industry (Guo, 2021). This editorial preference is evident in CEPN’s latest Corporate Social Responsibility Report (CEMG, 2024), which highlights its achievements in propaganda reporting while only offering a brief summary of its public opinion supervision efforts. The investigative news story chosen for this summary, which focuses on “good practices” in the resource utilisation of waste cooking oil in Shanghai (ibid., p.19), further illustrates CEPN’s approach to public opinion supervision through *positive* narrative shaping and guidance.

While some internal interviewee members suggested that limited space for critical news has constrained their creativity and innovative practice, others believed it was appropriate to report positive publicity rather than expose negative news. For example, when talking about the press’s role in public opinion supervision, one internal member took safety incident coverage as one example to stress CEPN’s positive guiding role:

“Industry newspapers should lead the public opinion in a positive direction, unlike tabloid media favouring [negative] incident reporting. Nearly all companies have their own releasing method of publishing incident information. We don’t need to create a fuss. We must convey correct and positive values to the public. Thus, we rarely do this [criticism] thing. Nowadays, Chinese companies have become much more open and transparent. Most companies will respond to the public by themselves quickly” (Interviewee A7, 23 November 2022, Online).

Furthermore, this interviewee also questioned how CEN “produces public opinion” by conducting “negative” news reporting. One interviewee from CEN also commented on the difference between CEN and CEPN at this point:

“CEPN always serve governments and corporates with positive news reporting, no negative voice. These industry companies, of course, are pleased with that. But public opinion supervision is our news media’s responsibility to improve the industry” (Interviewee A8, 15 November 2022, Online).

Another interviewee from CEN more sharply critiqued CEPN:

“Internally, we used to consider their performance quite good, especially in their coverage of major themed events, where they often identified good angles for storytelling. However, much of it was not considered as news - it was more like propaganda with limited news value” (Interviewee A14, 19 September 2022, Online).

This study will not judge the contrasting beliefs between CEN and CEPN but observes that the cultural conflict highlighted by interviewees reveals how CEPN holds different values toward news production compared to CEN. It argues that CEPN demonstrates a clearer value orientation towards serving the government and enterprises, with a correspondingly weakened focus on serving the public. One reason is that the long-standing link with the industry has shaped their publicity role to advocate and promote the electric power industry actors. This industry-bound linkage contains formal relationships, such as business, and also informal sentiment attachments.

“The electric power industry is the soil from which CEPN has survived. And historically speaking, CEPN and the industry actors belongs to one family. How can we say bad things about them? Many critical topics CEPN cannot touch upon. The interests of CEPN and the industry are highly overlapping and highly bundled. How can we conduct critical reporting? No way. This is not solely determined by our supervisors or the censorship. We must consider that we have been ‘employed’ by this industry. We have been rooted in this industry. We must survive and depend on this industry. Many things cannot be done, or difficult for us to carry them out” (Interviewee A6, 21 November 2022, Online).

Another interviewee also suggested that a weakened sense of supervision in CEPN is mainly a result of economic motives rather than a result of strict censorship:

“Indeed, there would be negative incidents. But it is not a subjective decision not to report it. If reported, there would be no revenue. This is for sure. CEPN has been unable to get out of the industry [connection]. The two are deeply bound together, so this relationship of dependence may also become a kind of bondage,

limiting our weak capability in conducting the supervision of public opinion” (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

Furthermore, Interviewee Liu even used “the son of the electric power industry” to describe the role of CEPN, which echoes the family metaphor described by its internal members. Although CEN also depends on sponsors from the energy industry to gain revenues, CEPN has inherited its serving role from its organisational history. Furthermore, CEPN shows a case of the significant influence brought by the long-term commercial connection between media and advertisers. No matter if CEPN sees itself as an “employee” of the industry sponsors, or “a son” of the industry “family”, CEPN has adopted a positive guiding role to promote and publicise their “family” or “moneybags” (Interviewee A4). This familial metaphor indicates their internalised belief in the relationship where CEPN members see themselves as fundamentally tied to and serving the interests of their industry sponsors, viewing these industry sponsors as integral to CEPN’s identity and even survival. In addition to industry sponsors, the NEA, as its new supervisory body, has strengthened the ties between CEPN and the entire electric power and even broader energy sector. One advertiser interviewee suggested:

“CEPN now has NEA as a strong backer, and they have steady income and business connections in the industry. They all belong to one system” (Interviewee A2, 6 November 2022, Online).

Unlike CEN and SGN, CEPN operates in a tightly integrated system where industry regulators and corporations directly support its economic stability and business ties. This clearly explains why their journalistic practice prioritises “good news” coverage over engaging in public opinion supervision that involves reporting “bad news”.

5.3.2 Unified Values for Digital and Print

Regarding editorial policies at CEPN, its internal members highlighted the importance of *An Quan* (安全), meaning “content security/safety” and “mistake avoidance,” in both digital and print reporting. Similar to the practice of “reporting good news, not bad news,” CEPN prioritises ensuring all published materials comply with censorship regulations and align with industry and government interests, avoiding controversial or potentially negative topics that could disrupt social harmony. Especially in terms of digital news policies, CEPN demonstrates a more cautious approach by enforcing a strict, unified editorial policy, ensuring that news events are reported with identical content across multiple platforms. One

interviewee described the process of publishing digital news in CEPN as avoiding any mistakes:

“When journalists got news from the frontline, for fear of making mistakes, any important manuscript had to be sent to the newspaper for editing, correction, and approval before it can be posted on digital media platforms. This is not the right way to play. This is propaganda, not news. Reporting news means immediacy should be prioritised, but that’s not the case at CEPN. News coverage often has to wait two or three days to be published in the newspaper first and then posted on digital platforms, by which time other media outlets have already published it. What’s the point [of publishing it so late]? Every important news item here is handled this way without exception. This approach has become an unwritten rule. Even our supervisor [NEA] only acknowledges and shares the content that was published in the newspaper, not on the digital platforms. Everything remains ‘newspaper-first’—this mindset has slowed down CEPN’s progress” (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

This comment illustrates that timeliness, journalistic impact, or audience attention is not a priority at CEPN. Due to prioritising *An Quan*, CEPN has adopted a unified strategy in digital reporting, ensuring that digital content remains consistent, rigorous, and standardised with print content. Interviewee A4 further noted, “Sometimes, the leader would prefer to forgo a piece of quality content rather than risk any potential issues.” Although this approach is effective in maintaining content security and compliance, it limits the flexibility of digital reporting to adapt to the demands of digital readers. As highlighted by Interviewee A9:

“The lengthy process of digital news publishing clashes with the fast-paced nature required for digital news reporting nowadays” (15 November 2022, Online).

Although a “digital-first” approach is often constrained by entrenched print culture in the digital transition of newspaper firms (Groves and Brown, 2020), CEPN exemplifies how strict censorship and its deep-rooted connections with the electric power industry have limited the organisation’s flexibility to enhance its journalistic impact in the digital era. As noted by Interviewee A9, the basic assumptions held by its supervisory entity, the NEA, have also impacted CEPN’s prioritisation:

“For governmental bodies, innovativeness, speediness, or creativity are not the most important. Everything is centred on stability” (Interviewee A9, 15 November 2022, Online).

Under NEA’s supervision, CEPN leader also needs to address the concerns of their higher-ups. Consequently, prioritising the newspaper has become the safest approach to ensure publishing accuracy and correctness while avoiding risks to CEPN and NEA. Consequently,

“play it safe” has shaped its editorial policy, leading CEPN to adopt a unified approach to maintain controlled results across its multiplatform reporting. This approach contrasts sharply with CEN’s focus on traffic and immediacy in its digital news policies.

In conclusion, the cultural specificities of CEPN are primarily reflected its strong caution in editorial policies, preference for positive framing, unified multi-platform reporting strategy to avoid risks and maintain compliance. Drawing on Küng’s (2023, p.117) observation that “success creates inertia” in media organisations, this study suggests that CEPN’s historical bond with the electric power industry, alongside its strong ties to both industry and government, has fostered inertia in its editorial preference for positive publicity as well as avoidance of negative public opinion.

5.4 SGN: a Servient Culture

Among the three selected cases, the organisational culture at SGN demonstrates the strongest dependency on its controlling entity and the weakest engagement with public issues as a press entity. Established in 2006, SGN has become one of the most renowned corporate newspapers in China, boasting the largest circulation among the three cases selected for this study (see Table 4-1). SGN is a nationally circulated industry newspaper targeting audiences within the power industry, with five issues published weekly from Monday to Friday. A significant cultural distinction of SGN is its strong *servient culture*, where its primary role is to serve and support its higher authority. Its activities, decisions, and goals are largely driven by the needs, priorities, and directives of its controlling entity, SGCC. This includes adherence to political obedience, Party propaganda, and positive corporate image maintenance. Consequently, SGN does not exhibit a typical press culture, which values editorial independence, critical analysis, and public service. Instead, it reflects a servient subculture within SGCC’s broader organisational culture.

5.4.1 A Propaganda Stance

In China’s energy industry, there have been multiple industry newspapers which are also called corporate newspapers (企业报) (Song, 2015), such as *China Petroleum Daily*, *China Petrochemical News*, similar to SGN, established, supervised, and sponsored by China’s giant SOEs, but also publicly circulated on the national level. Globally, it is not uncommon for organisations to utilise internal newspapers to assist internal communication, convey the organisation’s interest, disseminate information about the change, and promote the corporate culture and values (Hughes, 2000). In theory, internal newspapers aim at staying in touch

with their employees and key stakeholders. However, corporate newspapers in China also focus on external communication—to both brand their corporate stories, influence policymakers for industry policies, and shape public opinion for the corporate's interests. In one word, the existence of corporate paper titles like SGN embodies China's unique media system, illustrating the continuity of China's traditional propaganda-based system.

One basic context of China's energy industry is the existence of state monopoly and protectionism (Boubakri et al., 2009). Nearly every segmented industry within the energy realm has SOEs. SGCC, the entity controlling SGN, is one of these monopolistic enterprises, supervised by China's central government (Xu, 2017). According to its official website, SGCC is the largest utility company in the world¹¹. It operates 27 provincial-level companies, 6 regional companies, and 34 directly affiliated entities. Although SGCC is not the only utility company responsible for power transmission and distribution in China, it covers most of the country and dominates the nation's electric power grid market. Consequently, its perspectives largely shape industry opinions, and news from SGCC occupies a significant portion of the electric power grid industry's media space in China.

Given its industry status, SGN is officially classified as an industry newspaper by the China Association of Industry Newspapers. However, SGN represents a unique media product in China, functioning simultaneously as both a Party newspaper and a corporate newspaper. It is important to note that SOEs in China are not only enterprises that seek profit-making but also “in effect arms of the Party-state” to serve political and socioeconomic missions (Yu, 2019). As illustrated by Figure 5-1, SGCC even holds the same administrative level as the NEA, implying its substantial economic power and high political status in China. Therefore, SGN's strategic role has been integrated into the SOE ecosystem where SGCC is based, functioning as both an organ media of Party Committee within SGCC to fulfil its propaganda role for the Party and the central authority and a news outlet publicising industry news to the specialised audience. One advertiser interviewee described the role of SGN in supporting SGCC:

“One major reason for launching SGN is SGCC's enormous size. They need a unified channel to build and maintain a positive corporate image as a public-serving entity and to consolidate organisational cohesion nationwide” (Interviewee A1, 8 November 2022, Online).

¹¹ SGCC is the largest utility company in revenue (\$460.6 billion in 2022) globally, ranking third in the Fortune Global 500 in 2023.

As highlighted by an internal member, SGN's strategic position is "integrating into the big picture, serving the system, and supporting the headquarter [SGCC]" (Zheng, 2022). This slogan reflects SGN's commitment to actively shaping the narrative surrounding SGCC, reinforcing both Party and corporate messages to internal and external stakeholders and maintaining SGCC's positive corporate image. Although journalistic values are less prioritised than corporate interests in SGN, based on document analysis, its newsroom operations are similar to those of conventional newspaper organisations in China. This includes the news management system of "three reviews and three proofs" (三审三校) (SGN, 2020), "pursuing on-the-spot interviews" (He, 2015), a well-established nationwide correspondent network, and a national team of journalists holding certified journalist licenses (SGN, 2020). One internal interviewee noted:

"Our operations are not fundamentally different from those of other newspapers; the core department similarly lies in our editorial team. We have professionally trained team of journalists and editors, and our internal review process is highly strict, supported by a comprehensive quality management manual and well-established review standards" (Interviewee A10, 12 August 2023, Beijing).

Although the process of news production is self-claimed nothing distinctive from others, this study observed that news selection and order of SGN is highly dependent on the SGCC's willingness rather than the public needs. One early study on Chinese corporate newspaper firms highlighted that, the "people, materials, and money" of corporate news media are all controlled by the institutional departments of the parent corporation; no internal members are willing to create "conflicts" and "instability" through critical coverage (Cao, 2013). Obviously, there is no motive for SGN to exercise the typical role of news outlets to conduct public opinion supervision and critical reporting. Instead, SGN acts as an effective tool for SGCC to respond to any issues from the public opinion to maintain its reputation.

Compared to CEPN, SGN's newspaper coverages were even more propaganda-oriented, focusing on political propaganda, corporate progress, and employees' achievements or inspirational stories. As both an industry and corporate newspaper, SGN frequently prioritised coverage related to China's top leaders, even when such content had little direct relevance to the energy sector or SGCC. News about SGCC was often placed in secondary positions when there is news about the top leader. Figure 5-5 shows the first page of SGN published on Monday September 2, 2024, illustrating its editorial policy in positioning headlines according to its newsroom's perceived importance.



Figure 5-5. A Sample First Page of SGN and the Headlines

With a “persuading-oriented” news culture (Chen, 2014) based on a corporate media stance, some interviewees questioned the actual outcome of SGN as a “corporate news outlet”:

“I think only a few employees read SGN much, not to mention young employees or external readers. Only the top managers may need to gather some company updates from the newspaper” (Interviewee A6, 21 November 2022, Online).

This comment, to some extent, aligns with the finding of another early study in China, which highlighted that corporate newspapers like SGN often adopted “self-oriented standards”, resulting in “only the people who wrote will read it,” and “only the people who were mentioned in the newspaper may want to read it” (Li, 2012, p.18). However, interviewees with close personal connections to SGCC employees suggested that SGN primarily serves the leaders rather than the employees:

“[SGN] is mainly read by management personnel. This is not only due to the nature of the content but also because of age differences. Most managers, being from an older generation compared to younger employees, are still accustomed to using printed materials to gather information” (Interviewee A7, 23 November 2022, Online).

Interviewees suggested that although SGN is designed for organisational communication in print format, it primarily engages the upper management rather than employees at all levels in actual practice. This limited engagement not only questions SGN’s effectiveness but also underscores its servient culture, which exhibits hierarchical features by focusing on serving

the interests of upper-level management. This focus also raises the question that how a propaganda-oriented corporate newspaper in China like SGN maintains its financial stability and develops its digital capabilities. Given the limited research on Chinese industry newspapers, the following sub-section will explore a de-marketized model of Chinese newspaper firms like SGN, focusing on the underlying assumptions driving SGN's organisational operation and development.

5.4.2 A De-marketization Approach

Although SGN is the least market-oriented in the selected three cases, Interviewee A5 noted, "SGN has the least financial worries" (19 November 2022, Online). Based on interviews with both industry advertisers and professionals, the developmental logic of SGN is deeply rooted in the performance evaluation system designed by SGCC, targeting its departments and subsidiaries within SGCC, ensures continuous content contribution, subscription, and business engagement for SGN, thus securing SGN's stable news sources, subscription numbers, and advertising revenues. As one interviewee explained:

"SGCC requires all subsidiaries to voice their movement and make an appearance on SGN, and this is included in the assessment system...; This assessment system is also a kind of reward and punishment system, ensuring their subsidiaries actively contribute news contents" (Interviewee A2, 6 November 2022, Online).

Notably, SGN's operational logic is de-marketized, presenting a controlled nature. A former China-based study on SGN has suggested the high dependence of SGN on *administrative means*: SGCC's headquarter issued official documents through top-down administrative methods to require each company's support for newspaper circulation (Li, 2012). This is also demonstrated by the current study's interview:

"Due to these mandatory requirements, the clearly listed assessment criteria leave their subsidiary companies with no choice but to pay and support" (Interviewee A5, 19 November 2022, Online).

According to previous studies by Pang (2008) and Li (2012), the circulation of SGN was around 230,000 copies. Due to the vast corporate size of SGCC, SGN can easily rely on its dozens of subsidiary companies within its SGCC system, using administrative measures as the main means and market measures as auxiliary means to achieve a very stable circulation and advertising revenues. Moreover, the economic strength and political status of SGCC make it even more secure in funding sources for SGN compared to CEN and CEPN. When

many of China's newspapers were facing self-financing pressures, one case study on SGN mentioned, "SGN faces nearly no competition or pressure in terms of editorial quality, circulation channels, and commercial revenues" (Pang, 2008).

Endowed with inherent advantages from its formation, SGN possesses various resources that CEN and CEPN lack. Due to its limited financial pressure, working at SGN was externally perceived as "safe and stable" (安稳) (Interviewee A5, 19 November 2022, Online) and "a secured job" (铁饭碗) (Interviewee A3, 12 November 2022, Online). However, an internal member suggested working at SGN is not that easy:

"The personnel here are highly skilled and work very hard. You have to understand, the internal review process at SGN is extremely stringent" (Interviewee A10, 17 August 2023, Online).

The high strictness highlighted by internal members implies the controlled nature of SGN's organisational culture. Another interviewee further indicated that the culture at SGN lacks internal dynamism:

"My impression of SGN is that it feels quite static and lacks dynamism, maintaining the same routine year after year" (Interviewee A6, 21 November 2022, Online).

Interviews suggest that SGN's organisational culture is rooted in a centralised, resource-supported model that prioritises stability, control, and adherence to rigorous standards, with an acceptance of controlled internal change. Although there is a limited motive for SGN to change, adequate funding and resources also brought about multiple advantages in recruiting digital manpower for digital growth and new technological applications within SGN. According to SGN's news release, its new media team based in the headquarter alone had 32 members by 2020 and "the average age of this team member is under 30 years old" (Gao and Lu, 2020). Not to mention that SGN has dozens of "converging media stations" and 3,200 correspondents in their subsidiaries across the country to ensure "worry-free" sources of news (SGCC, 2020). In contrast, as previously mentioned, self-reliant CEN still struggles to support a large number of digital employees and stations and CEPN also faces limitations in its digital team size.

Additionally, SGN also has the advantage of adopting new technologies with sufficient financial support from the SGCC. For instance, SGN has already self-developed and applied its own intelligent proofreading system specifically based on the electric power corpus (Lai

et al., 2021). In contrast, interviewees at CEN commonly commented that technological investment shortage has significantly constrained their digital growth. It is also important to note that, all three cases have started to adopt some of the digital technologies to innovate their current content management tools or product innovations, which will be particularly introduced in Chapter 7. However, interviewees believed that SGN has much more sufficient resources on manpower and technology to invest in developing their digital products *without the premise of marketability*.

Overall, SGN presents a particular case of a Chinese corporate newspaper, both acting as an industry newspaper and a Party newspaper of SOE. Although SGN follows a conventional news media process to perform their tasks and has been officially verified as a news outlet by the authority, its news reporting strategies observed by this study are mainly publicity-based for its own corporate interests. Its value is highly rooted in the will of SGCC rather than in the expectations of a broader audience. A corporate newspaper like SGN, which may defy the logic of conventional news dissemination, can still maintain stable internal circulation and consistent revenue thanks to the robust administrative power and financial strength of SGCC. Thus, this study characterises SGN as holding a servient culture.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter illustrates that Chinese newspaper firms often possess distinct cultural traits exhibited by their varied self-censorship strategies, editorial stances, and organisational priorities, while they also share certain cultural commonalities shaped by the broader political and economic systems in China. The first commonality is a shared norm of integrating CCP ideology and state directives into organisational practices for fulfilling their “authority” roles as state media under the *Guozitou* label. Both newspaper practitioners and advertisers interviewed in this study shared the belief that the official background of state media grants them prestige, status, and a guarantee of survival. The second cultural commonality is the symbolic nature of these firms’ participation in China’s national media convergence strategy. Internal members observed that Converging Media Construction was more of a compliant response than a transformative force, given the uncertainty of digital growth and the continued dominance of print-related business. The final shared cultural phenomenon is the collaboration between advertisers and journalists, which has become an accepted norm in news production. This “co-creation of news” reflects the influence of informal relationships between newspaper firms and advertisers, further blurring the line between commercial and journalistic interests.

However, each newspaper firm follows a distinct developmental path, with the primary cultural differences stemming from their differing foundational assumptions around self-censorship, editorial stance, and priorities. These variations have shaped their different approaches to public opinion supervision, digital news policies, and organisational growth. CEN embodies a self-reliant culture that values relative independence and its responsibility for public opinion supervision. In contrast, CEPN is deeply tied to China's electric power industry, and its stance is heavily influenced by industry interests and its supervisory entity's demands, resulting in a preference for positive narratives around industry topics. Additionally, CEPN prioritises safely reporting over journalistic values, leading to its uniform approach across digital and print platforms, limiting its flexibility for adaptation. Lastly, SGN represents a subordinate culture characterised by a high acceptance of control with limited financial pressure and prioritisation of serving the interests of SGCC over those of a broader audience.

Overall, this chapter demonstrates the critical influence of structural context in shaping the cultural characteristics of Chinese newspaper firms. Ownership, as a key structural factor, plays a significant role in explaining the underlying mechanisms behind the cultural commonalities and differences observed. The next chapter will explore these issues in greater detail.

6 Media Ownership and Newspaper Culture in China

This section examines the relationship between media ownership and the cultural commonalities and differences within Chinese newspaper organisations, focusing on how China's ownership arrangement influences these dynamics. It first addresses the oversimplifications in current scholarship on China's media ownership, which often overlooks the interactions between ownership, agents, and newspaper autonomy. To address this gap, the chapter begins by defining the media ownership boundaries in China's newspaper industry and then analyses how lesser studied "agent owners" have shaped the observed cultural variations.

6.1 Ownership Relations of Chinese Newspapers

Ownership often refers to a combination of legal rights and responsibilities concerning tangible and intangible assets (Yan, 2000). In media studies, media ownership means the commercial and legal control of media corporations by one or more entities, such as individuals, corporations, and governments (Daniel and Rod, 2011). In China, the ownership pattern of domestic newspapers has been strictly defined as state-owned (Zhang, 2010). State ownership implies the state is the newspaper firm's "owner" ostensibly on behalf of its citizens (Milhaupt, 2020). China's existing law defines that "the whole people" in China own all state-owned assets, and the governmental body exercises the ownership on behalf of the state¹². In terms of property attributes, Chinese newspaper enterprises are primarily state-owned assets. However, this study finds that media ownership and control are not directly centralised. The oversimplified view of "state-media" ownership neglects the multi-tiered agency structure linking the owners to newspapers. The vague and unclarified boundaries of media ownership in China have also been criticised by multiple Chinese scholars (Du, 2014; Guan, 2005; Zhu, 2017).

The literature review reveals that existing research on state ownership in the media industry and analyses of official policies regarding Chinese media ownership remain insufficient. One major reason for this gap is the ambiguity surrounding the state ownership system and the "vacancy" of media owners in its management practice (Zhang, 2007a; Zhu, 2017). In China's current regulations on state-owned assets management, the authority sets a basic

¹² More details can be found in the Law of PRC on the State-owned Assets of Enterprises, issued in 2008 by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress

principle of “state ownership and hierarchical management.” Specifically, 1) **central governmental bodies**, such as SASAC (the investor and supervisor of 97 central SOEs, including SGCC) and the Ministry of Finance, as well as 2) **non-central governmental bodies at different levels**, such as local governments, assume the responsibility of *investors* and exercise their right over the corresponding state-owned enterprise. Additionally, 3) **certain Party organs and central administrative units**, such as PD (the supervisory entity of CEN), also fulfil the roles of *investor* and *asset supervisors* (Shi, 2020). Consequently, considering all state-owned enterprise owners as a unified entity, namely “the state”, is insufficient in China. Thus, when analysing SOEs in China, former studies have divided state ownership into subcategories, such as “local state ownership” and “central state ownership” based on the administrative level of owner rights exercisers (Yang et al., 2021) or “majority state ownership” and “minority state ownership” according to the proportion of state-owned shares (Zhou et al., 2017).

In this study, a hierarchical design for managing state ownership can be identified in three selected Chinese industry newspapers: CEN, CEPN and SGN. Although three newspaper organisations share the same *nominal owner*, namely the state (on behalf of the whole people of China), they have different agents of state ownership acting as *de facto owners*. According to the Chinese enterprise information database provided by *Tianyancha*¹³, each newspaper selected for this study has one sole shareholder, which is the media group it belongs to; and the media group itself has one sole shareholder, which serves as the supervisory entity for the newspaper firm (See Figure 6-1, which has been further simplified for specificity based on Figure 5-1). The ownership management structure follows a consistent pattern: newspaper firms are typically fully invested by a media group, which is, in turn, invested by their supervisory body. In essence, the supervisory body of each newspaper firm in China exercises media control through its power of public administration while also assuming the responsibility and rights of the “investor” and “owner” (Du, 2014).

¹³ *Tianyancha* is a large Chinese corporate information database sourced from more than 2000 verified data indexes assisting users to search a company’s background, shareholding information, board members, operating risks, and intellectual property. The link is <https://www.tianyancha.com/>

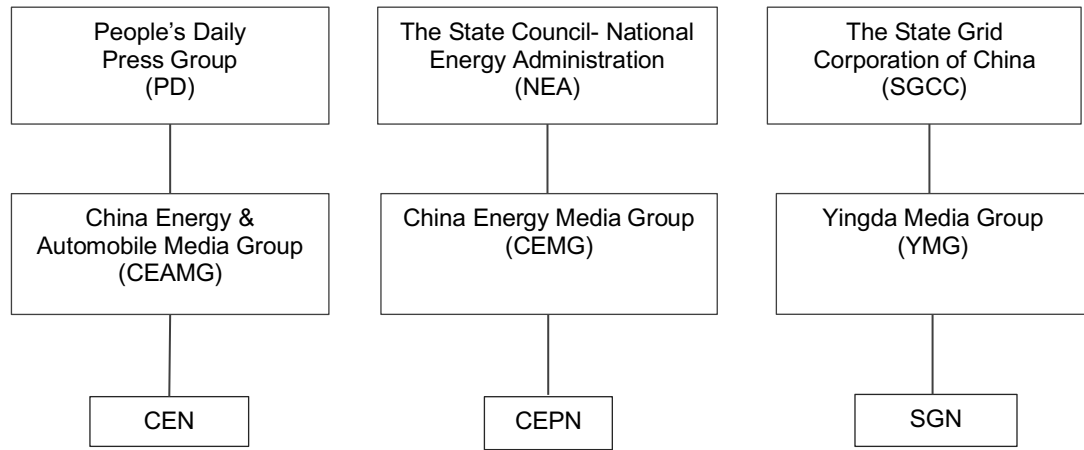


Figure 6-1. Hierarchical Relationships Between Three Newspaper Firms, Media Groups, and Supervisory Entities (Source: Author's Own Design)

Although the establishment of media groups helps to some extent in separating the ownership and control of newspapers (Zhu, 2017), interviews suggested that three newspaper firms are still largely under the control of its supervisory entity rather than the media group, especially in terms of censorship, manager appointment, and administration management. More importantly, media professionals expressed a collective feeling that the supervisory unit owns the newspaper and that they feel a stronger sense of belonging to this supervisory unit, which controls and holds shares in the newspaper firm, albeit indirectly. According to China's existing law, the investors of state-owned assets have the right to profit from their investments, participate in making major decisions, and select managers on behalf of the government¹⁴. Therefore, this study proposes that *the de facto body* exercising ownership rights and interests in Chinese newspaper firms is *the supervisory authority* rather than the abstract notion of the “state” or “the whole people”.

Drawing on the Agency Theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976), this study divides state media ownership of China into two parts to better assist further analysis. The first is the nominal owner of state-owned assets, referred to as the *principal owner*, and the other is the de facto investor and supervisory body of each newspaper firm, known as *the agent owner*. As the central authority has empowered various supervisory bodies to exercise the owner rights over newspaper firms, those supervisory bodies have become *the agents of the state principal*. Dividing the newspaper ownership into the principal owner and the agent owner can effectively help decode the common and differentiate cultures among three newspapers at multiple layers. One significant finding of this study is that the principal owner of Chinese

¹⁴ This is based on the Law of the PRC on State-owned Assets of Enterprises, published in 2008. More details: http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2008-10/28/content_1134207.htm

newspapers plays a crucial role in shaping cultural commonality, whereas the agent owner plays a more significant role in shaping the cultural difference between the three newspaper firms. One key reason for the agent owners' influence in generating cultural differentiation of their respective subordinate newspaper firms lies in their distinct institutional roles and interest demands.

Each agent owner selected in this study represents a different institutional role, and their respective demand, priorities, and cultural values also permeate the beliefs and values within their subordinate newspaper's organisational culture. This study proposes a simple classification of three agent owners according to their institutional functions: PD as a Party press group can be classified as a *media institution*, NEA as a governmental body under the State Council can be categorised as a *government institution*, and SGCC as a central SOE, can be classified as a *non-media corporate institution*. Each agent owner represents a certain type of institution within China's energy industry and society. The cultural values stemming from principal and agent owners' institutional roles can be observed in the three industry newspapers' cultures. The next section will delve into the findings on the role of state ownership in the observed cultural commonalities, providing further sights into the shared cultural formation in today's Chinese industry newspapers.

6.2 State Ownership and Cultural Commonalities

By analysing the positioning of three selected newspaper organisations discussed in the previous chapter, it is evident that Chinese newspapers play an instrumental role in China's political governance. They are assisting ideological propaganda, disseminating decisions of the centralised authority, facilitating the implementation of the Party-state's governance goals, and helping maintain the authority's centralised status in China. To fulfil this function, this study argues that media ownership is a critical system that establishes and upholds the legitimacy of the centralised authority's control over news media organisations. Ownership entails both economic and political power (Michie and Lobao, 2012). Indeed, the owners, both principal and agent owners, of Chinese newspaper firms, benefit economically from owning state-owned assets and politically from exerting control over the newspaper firms. Therefore, this study considers the role of ownership in shaping newspaper cultures not only from the economic ties between owners and newspaper firms but also from the supervisory relations between them. This establishes the foundational logic for the subsequent analysis.

6.2.1 Media Ownership and Collective Identification

Chapter 5 has explored the common cultural attributes of organisational culture shared in three selected cases. The first significant cultural commonality lies in their collective identification with a state media identity. Their self-categorisation is exemplified by their recognition as *Guozitou* Media (see Section 5.1.1) and their unwavering belief in their authoritativeness as a state newspaper. Additionally, three selected cases strongly hold the idea of serving the Party and the state, further reinforcing their shared identification. Two significant factors have played a critical role in forming this shared identification of state media. Firstly, the institutional arrangements within China's media ownership system, which aims to govern and control the news media, have laid the institutional foundation for this process. These arrangements provide a framework that shapes the expectations and roles of state media organisations. Secondly, the broader cultural norms within Chinese society, which emphasise recognition and compliance with the centralised authority, have ideologically reinforced the social acceptance of the state media identity.

For the former, media ownership is a crucial institutional arrangement within China's media governance since it significantly establishes the *legitimacy* of the Party-state's ownership, leadership, and control over Chinese newspaper organisations. The term "media governance" refers here to the entirety of rules designed to organise the media systems (Puppis, 2010). State ownership in China not only establishes a relationship between the state and media but also endows the owning entities with legitimate rights and responsibilities. This is achieved by delegating the roles of central authority in investing and supervising to the agent owners of newspaper firms. Correspondingly, state ownership defines the obligations and duties of Chinese newspapers to serve the state's interests and meet the authority's requirements. As a result, the shared self-identification of its organisational role of serving the Party-state becomes an accepted, cultural product of China's media system. Through continuous fulfilment of obligations, each newspaper has developed a sense of belonging and a collective belief in the legitimacy of state ownership. At the same time, this collective belief becomes a key force sustaining the effectiveness of China's media control.

As the Chinese sociologist Zhou (2010) suggests, China, with a vast territory and a large population with diverse local cultures and uneven economic development, particularly faces a formidable scale of governance and challenges. The same is true of Chinese newspapers. Firstly, the distribution scale of China's newspaper industry is large, and the regional differences are also large, which increases the complexity of newspaper governance.

Although Chinese newspaper titles have decreased since 2011, China still has 1,752 newspapers by 2021, including national, provincial, metropolitan, and county newspapers (NPPA, 2023a). Most importantly, the centralised form of governance highly increases the difficulties of effective media governance because the centralised authority demands that all newspapers across China be subordinate to its control. Media ownership has become an indispensable system to govern the press in China. To reduce transaction costs in terms of handling the complex, wide-ranging newspaper firms nationwide, China's approach to managing media ownership is to delegate its central authority to the agent owners to effectively enforce the top-down administrative order and policy intentions to ensure that any news publishers can be in sync with the central government.

Nevertheless, a national regime cannot be sustainably established based solely on institutional rules or high-pressure politics; it requires ideological support and obedience from the people (Zhou, 2010). Similarly, institutional arrangement alone, for example, setting the statutory ownership relations between the media and state, cannot ensure the effectiveness of media governance. Ideological sustainment has also significantly contributed to China's authoritative media governance and the identified cultural commonalities. First, China has historically cultivated its cultural root of collective obedience to authority due to the far-reaching impacts of Confucianism. Confucian culture values paternalistic authority and believes an efficient society is based on "a broadly accepted ordering of people" (Heisey, 2000). Specifically, Confucianism assumes that it is acceptable for the superior to enjoy more rights to exercise power, and the inferior should perform more obligations than rights, especially of obedience (Yan, 2006). As a result, the hierarchy mindset has been deeply rooted in China's cultural norms even today (Zhang, 2007b). China's culture of authority and hierarchy has broadly laid the cultural root for the news publishers' recognition and obedience to the central charge. Besides, the deeply held hierarchy mindset resulting from Confucian culture is also a significant reason why China-based advertisers and newspaper practitioners often emphasise the political status and their agent owner's identity in evaluating newspaper firms, even in today's digital media era.

Another ideological maintenance method is the continuous ritualisation to mobilise Party members within newspaper firms as the primary target to enhance adherence to the Party's leadership (also mentioned in Section 5.1.1). One principle that China's authority constantly stresses regarding governing news media or state-owned enterprises is to "adhere to the leadership of the Party". Thus, China's media governance also delivers the Party's control over each newspaper firm through state ownership. Chapter 5 has revealed that three

newspapers have established their Party committees, and their top leaders also serve as the secretaries of the Party committee. Their frequent promotion of “red culture” through ideological indoctrination by Party members and leaders within the newspaper firm, along with their joint prioritisation of aligning political propaganda with agenda-setting in journalistic practice, demonstrates that Chinese newspaper firms actively maintain loyalty and symbolic compliance with the Party’s leadership in China. From this perspective, state ownership creates an essential institutional channel that helps the Party’s leadership to ideologically shape and reinforce collective identification and obedience within news media organisations in China as well.

In addition to shaping the shared norm of authority, China’s institutional approach to media ownership also has created a hierarchy culture of authoritativeness over news outlets. At first, media ownership has established the subordinate relationship between the media and central authority. Chapter 5 found that the advertisers’ underlying assumption of the value of *Guozitou* media is that those newspaper titles that start with “China” are often privileged in high authoritativeness and credibility. Although this finding may not apply to other highly marketised media industry segments (since the energy industry still exhibits a relatively solid political overtone), this study demonstrates that state ownership is a critical aspect that industrial advertisers will consider when they select and decide which media outlets they will commercially cooperate with. Advertisers subconsciously assume that the higher the administrative level of a newspaper supervisor/agent owner, the closer the newspaper is to the centre of the power and possesses a higher level of authoritativeness and reputation. The interviews reveal that advertisers perceive state-owned media outlets, particularly those supervised by high-level administrative entities, as beneficial for endorsing their corporate brands and gaining trust and recognition from their intended audience. Thus, this study argues that media ownership in China politically impacts the external evaluation of Chinese newspaper firms, which also reinforces newspaper practitioners’ collective identification.

Not only media organisations but also most of China’s SOEs are often perceived as the beneficiaries of government-granted privileges, and this perception has become widely accepted as a norm (Zhou et al., 2017). Policy reviews in Chapter 3 illustrated how China’s regulatory bodies “protect” their mouthpieces by prioritising resources to state-owned media, such as the regulations on online news reporting to limit press licenses to state-owned media only (NPPA, 2005). Due to the privilege of accessing scarce resources empowered by state ownership, nearly all interviewees suggest limited threats brought about by the rapid growth of digital media to the market position of three industry newspapers. Although several

interviewees stress that ownership privilege also breeds complacency and lack of crisis awareness (see Chapter 7), media ownership in China has provided the basis for legitimising news publishers to take resource advantage from their owners, shaping their underlying assumptions on privilege enjoyment. Overall, the significant role of state ownership in shaping and maintaining the organisation-based identification of industry newspapers is evident.

6.2.2 Media Ownership and Synchronised Response

Chapter 5 also identified a consensus of interviewees' opinions that the state-led media convergence strategy has become a *standard* solution for newspaper organisations in China to deconstruct their old identity at the current stage. Although some interviewees expressed doubts about the practical outcomes of Converging Media Construction to newspapers (see Section 5.1.2), implementing this state-led strategy has become one obligative task assigned by China's central authority towards Chinese newspapers. This study notices that the NPPA (2023b) has added "Converging Media Construction" as one primary verification criterion to inspect and decide whether the news publisher can pass the official annual verification since 2023, while former verification standards were only limited to ideological correctness, the quality of news content, publishing norms and legitimacy, and the management of journalists. Furthermore, the NPPA requires each newspaper's supervisory entity to conduct self-examinations and produce implementation reports for the NPPA. The NPPA also performs random inspections and publicly announces annual reviews of newspaper firms. Thus, Chinese newspaper organisations' media convergence practice is not solely driven by technological changes (Doyle, 2002; Jenkins, 2004; Lawson-Borders, 2006) but involves the critical role of the Chinese media policy, which facilitates nationwide progress in media convergence as part of a state-led strategy.

The previous Chapter pointed out the homogeneity of the three newspapers' organisational synchronised response (such as similar behaviour in constructing the Converging Media Matrix and Central-Kitchen Model) towards the state-led media convergence. And that Chapter further argued that this cultural commonality is a result of the institutionalisation process of China's state-led media policy regarding media convergence. The state authority leads this process through rule-setting to regulate the behaviours of Chinese newspaper firms to follow the same standards to meet the official expectations. And China's media ownership has legitimised the obligations of the Chinese press to obey the authority's request and accept management from their superior. With this legalisation basis and regulatory means, media

convergence has been institutionalised into a developmental norm that expects all Chinese newspapers to follow and implement, ultimately facilitating a nationwide reliable, controllable, and manageable digital news media system in China.

However, aligning with previous research (Wang, 2023a; Yin and Liu, 2014), this study highlights that their synchronised response to the central government's request for media convergence was largely *symbolic*. Chapter 5 found that the current model of media convergence reporting in three Chinese newspaper firms is mainly event-driven and lacks sustainability unless an accepted convergence mechanism develops. Digital team interviewees from CEN and CEPN reported their disadvantageous treatment compared with traditional newspaper personnel at the organisational level. In contrast, traditional newspaper personnel, such as journalists, still held reservations about digital tasks, considering them to have a high level of uncertainty and preferring to maintain their well-established routines. Despite efforts into Converging Media Construction and the Central Kitchen Model of newsroom restructuring, the entrenched newspaper-centric value system within newspaper firms reveals the *uncertainty* perceived by internal members regarding the digital transition. As suggested by Chapter 5, one significant source of such tension is the absence of an updated evaluation, guidance, and statement on the functional positioning and actual benefits of digital business within newspaper firms at the organisational level. As a result, the internal members' perception of the actual value of participating in digital tasks in their day-to-day work remains highly uncertain and vague. This also partially explains why China's media convergence campaign acts more through symbolic compliance rather than a self-motivated digital transformation at the current stage.

There is a limited direct impact of media ownership on sustaining the inherent culture of newspaper-centric since the newspaper-centric values and beliefs have been firmly established along with the development of the newspaper industry regardless of their ownership patterns and national context (Groves and Brown, 2020). However, state ownership may indirectly impact and weaken the priority of digital tasks within Chinese newspapers. Fulfilling their significant political obligations is a top priority of newspaper organisations in China, rather than pursuing digital growth. In addition, due to their exclusive resource advantages given by China's media ownership system, three newspapers are still highly valued as scarce resources in the specialised media market. Consequently, as advertiser interviewee Liu stressed, "[industry newspapers] experienced little market pressure, [which] insufficiently urged them to make a big change" (6 November 2022, Online). Indeed, the ongoing media convergence campaign in China has successfully

mobilised Chinese newspaper firms to follow the expected Converging Media Construction standards with a homogenous organisational layout. However, this converging progress mainly stays at the surface level since a newspaper-centric value system in newspaper firms has not been carefully reviewed and updated, generating cultural conflicts with desired digital-oriented change.

6.2.3 Media Ownership and Commercial Cultures

The third cultural commonality is the collective tacit acceptance of the blurred boundaries between news and propaganda/sponsored advertorials, where the intentional integration of soft propaganda into conventional news reporting has been accepted as a norm. Although the traditional separation between editorial and commercial has been increasingly weakened in journalistic practice worldwide (Cornia et al., 2020), this case study illustrates the active collaboration between advertisers and journalists in “co-creating” news stories, which emerges as an ethically problematic phenomenon. CEN and CEPN rely heavily on revenues generated from their industry advertisers, and SGN also heavily depends on substantial support from various firms within SGCC’s organisational system. As suggested by Chapter 5, industry newspapers’ dependence on industry sponsors is increasingly evident, continuously influencing editorial selections and eroding the independence of news coverage.

One prominent phenomenon observed by this research is the common acquiescence of newspaper practitioners on the “co-production” of some industry news reporting with advertisers. For instance, advertisers have been experienced in facilitating journalists to help inform their desired agenda, such as sponsoring field trips, organising interview opportunities with top managers, providing news sources, and even collaborating and planning news topics with journalists. Enjoying the low cost of gathering news and multiple conveniences provided by advertisers, journalists may intentionally (or unintentionally) accept the agenda set by the advertisers and incorporate the advertisers’ propaganda intent and demand into their news coverage. Besides, through interviewing advertisers, this study also found that energy industry advertisers exhibited a stronger inclination to shape public opinion and influence policy agendas, compared to typical advertisers who target mass media. On the one hand, advertisers, as significant information sources for industry journalists, have pre-selected information to deliver to the news reporters without revealing the whole picture. On the other hand, advertisers established interest relationships with industry newspapers by purchasing and sponsoring them to prevent any negative news reporting. As a result, the close integration between advertiser intervention and journalistic

practice may result in *the failure of communication* (Pan, 2012) in the efficiency of information resource allocation (Shi, 2014), i.e., the public hardly receives their needed news, and the government hardly gathers objective and accurate updates within the industry through industry newspapers. This outcome merits further research.

This study also observes that industry newspapers and industry advertisers in China have developed a close *symbiotic cultural value system*, largely compromising the independence of industry journalism. In response, industry newspaper professionals argued that such a situation is not directly tied to the ownership system. Instead, it stems from their heavy reliance on advertising revenues, which worsens the imbalance between serving public interest and catering to commercial interests in their news reporting. Despite being backed by their agent owners, commercial industry newspaper firms inevitably depend on advertising revenue to sustain their operations and maintain financial performance. As Interviewee A9 stressed:

“I don’t think state ownership necessarily means that state newspapers would never go out of business. If one day the advertisers no longer need us, we will collapse” (Interviewee A9, 15 November 2022, Online).

At this point, the pursuit of profit is the conventional demand of any business, including the newspaper business. Thus, regardless of ownership types, it is inevitable that advertisers exert their influence as the “filter” indirectly or directly to manipulate news reporting (Herman and Chomsky, 2010).

However, this study argues that the excessive reliance relations between industry advertisers and industry newspapers are related to the high concentration of power legitimised by state ownership in China. In this study, state ownership has empowered industry newspapers to enjoy a dominant position in the media landscape with limited competition from private media organisations. The lack of plurality in news media outlets has generated the concentration of power where advertisers have limited options for reaching their target audience, increasing the over-dependence of advertisers on the industry newspapers. In addition, as mentioned previously, advertisers from the energy industry exhibited a solid demand to influence policy agenda and public opinion rather than simply maintaining their corporate branding. The exclusive advantage of state-owned newspapers in connecting governmental bodies also determines advertisers’ high reliance on them to make corporate voices. More importantly, advertiser giants from the energy industry, as explored in Chapter 5, are often enterprises owned by the state, even monopolies. They share a joint interest with

the state authority and the newspapers based on the same ownership type. Newspapers may prioritise those advertiser giants from the industry due to their high economic and political status and the alignment of their joint interests with the government. As a result, the “collusion” between the advertisers and the newspapers (Pan, 2012; Shi, 2014) illustrates that state ownership can indirectly affect the relationship between advertisers and industry newspapers through its role in power distribution in the media landscape.

So far, this section explored how state ownership has laid the powerful institutional basis which has either directly or indirectly shaped cultural commonalities in collective identification, synchronised response, and the normalised “co-creation” phenomenon. The next section will analyse how China’s agency approach to state ownership has shaped the individual organisational culture observed in this study.

6.3 Agent Owners and Cultural Distinctiveness

This section explores how ownership shapes cultural distinctiveness among three paper titles, complementing the findings on cultural commonalities. Organisational culture is the embodiment of complex and diverse organisational life, and thus it is impossible to describe all aspects of their cultural differences. Based on collected data, this section selected two major aspects of cultural differences that are most representative, and commonly mentioned by interviewees to assist in further analysis of the relationship between media ownership and cultural formation: one is editorial policies, and the other is priority rules. These two aspects reflect the media management practices of the selected newspaper firms, influencing their strategies for overall direction and solutions for challenges like digital disruption. This section particularly examines how agent owners, empowered by China’s state ownership structure, have shaped the different cultural traits among Chinese newspaper firms from the perspectives of editorial policies and priority rules.

6.3.1 Agent Owner and Autonomy

Media censorship in China has received significant attention from global scholars owing to its rigorous, dynamic, and elusive nature (Hassid, 2020; Tai, 2014). Previous studies typically focused on the role of central regulatory bodies, such as the Central Publicity Department of the CCP and the NPPA, in exerting media control to uphold the rule of the CCP in China (Xu and Albert, 2014). However, one censorship body of the Chinese press has been largely overlooked, i.e., the agent owners. As highlighted previously in this chapter, agent owners, typically represented by supervisory units, often establish specific rules,

requirements, and expectations for their subordinate newspaper organisations based on their own organisational goals and interests. Consequently, agent owners often play the role of the primary “filter” (Herman and Chomsky, 2010) in guiding and censoring editorial selections on news topics and reporting orientations. Over time, newspaper professionals strive to meet the differentiated requirements and expectations of the agent owner, leading to the establishment of underlying norms and self-censorship mechanisms, which in turn define the organisational culture.

The first major manifestation, as found by this study, is that the institutional interests of different agent owners may significantly influence the *extent* of newsrooms’ autonomy and censorship mechanisms on their subordinate newspapers. In this multi-case study, according to interviews with both newspaper practitioners and advertisers, CEN enjoys the highest level of news autonomy among the three cases, CEPN has a lower level of freedom in news reporting, and SGN is considered to possess the lowest. As mentioned in Chapter 5, one distinctive underlying belief, compared with CEPN and SGN, that has evolved since the founding stage of CEN’s organisational culture is the necessity of a certain level of news autonomy. The founding leadership of CEN stressed the importance of keeping a certain level of independence from departmental interests, local interests, or certain corporate interests to produce industry news on multiple occasions (Li, 2004; Yuan, 2009; Yi, 2009). While it demonstrates the pivotal role of founding leadership in shaping organisational culture, it is also important to note that the agent owner of CEN, i.e., the PD, also offers and allows a certain degree of autonomy to CEN.

The PD, the largest press group in China, is widely recognised as the mouthpiece of the CCP Central Committee (see Figure 5-1). There may be a stereotype that the PD only serves as a propaganda tool with minimal news autonomy. For instance, in Stockman’s (2013) research, the PD was regarded as the newspaper with the most closed space for news reporting in China by interviewing media practitioners (p.72). However, as argued by the advertiser interviewee, the PD is one of the news media that is most capable of conducting critical reporting owing to its closest distance to the central committee of CCP:

“The PD is a Party mouthpiece and has the shortest distance from the central Party. Since the supervising entity is *People’s Daily*, it [CEN] has a relatively high tolerance and margin for error on such issues. As a result, CEN occasionally produces some quality critical news. In other words, the stricter the content control, the less ‘interesting’ the content becomes in our view” (Interviewee Liu, 6 November 2022, Online).

This argument may sound contradictory, but it is highly related to China's political culture. In China-based studies on public opinion supervision, Chen (2017) highlighted one unwritten rule within the Chinese press regarding critical reporting: it is acceptable when media outlets criticise the governmental bodies at a lower administrative level than the media has, and any criticism of higher-level officials must be guided by the central leadership to build a positive image of central leadership's the governance capabilities. This means that newspaper organisations supervised by higher administrative levels, such as the PD, theoretically have more room for critical reporting, but of course, this capability does not necessarily translate into action.

However, evidence shows that the PD has engaged in critical news reporting (Feng, 2013), supporting interviewee Liu's observation, but contradicting Stockman's (2013) findings. One famous example is when the PD published a critical news reportage on its front page in 2013, highlighting a local scandal involving the concealment of serious accidents in Shanxi Province. Typically, the front page of the PD is dominated by propaganda news about the leadership and significant political affairs. However, this critical reporting broke the public stereotype of Party papers. Additionally, the PD's online newspapers also show an established and maintained dedicated column, namely *Duzhe Laixin* (读者来信), to address the letters from its nationwide readership. These letters mainly consist of Chinese citizens' complaints about societal issues, and the PD conducts investigations and reports on these matters¹⁵.

Interviewee Liu further suggested that the PD positions the highest level among Chinese news media, which implies the greatest authority and more daring to make editorials and reports on sensitive social issues on behalf of the Party:

“I see the NEA as a governmental official and SGCC as a businessman. But the PD is none of these two, it is a ‘newspaper man’ [*Baoren*] —they value the ethos of newspaper professionals and care about the ‘family, nation and all-under-heaven’¹⁶” (Interviewee Liu, 6 November 2022, Online).

In Liu's viewpoint, the PD possesses the national perspective of observing and investigating issues, and most importantly, it is fulfilled through its institutional role as a press group.

¹⁵ PD's column of *Duzhe Laixin* is available online:
<http://leaders.people.com.cn/GB/178291/409148/421788/index.html>

¹⁶ “Family, state, and all-under-heaven” (*Jiagu Tianxia*) is an ancient Chinese idiom, stressing individual commitment, concern, responsibility, and loyalty to his or her family, the state, and the entire world.

Compared with CEN, both CEPN and SGN are supervised by non-media organisations, which relatively weakened their organisational capacity to fulfil their media function and received more intervention for non-media interests.

In principle, CEPN, for example, should exercise its media function of supervising the electric power industry, including the regulatory bodies within this industry, for the public interest. Nevertheless, due to the media ownership, CEPN is supervised by its agent owner, the NEA, which is the official entity in charge of the entire energy sector. Inevitably, CEPN hardly has the willingness to challenge the interests of its agent owner, the NEA. This largely limits CEPN's capability to exercise public opinion supervision in China's energy industry news reporting. The incompetence of public opinion supervision generated by China's agency approach to ownership management is even more evident in SGN since it is nearly impossible for SGN to conduct critical reports on its in-house companies and the grid industry, which has been monopolised by its agent owner SGCC. As a result, beyond state censorship, this study argues that the presence of agent owners further diminishes press autonomy in journalistic practice in China by exerting their legitimised control over newsroom policies, editorial stances, and topic selection to align with their institution's interests. This finding is significant and highlights the need for further exploration, as the influence of agent owners in China's press management has received limited scholarly attention. Moreover, there are currently no clear regulatory measures defining the boundaries of agent owners' interference in this context.

Compared to CEPN and SGN, multiple interviewees from CEN mentioned that the PD seldomly intervened in the news reporting of CEN. The major method of censorship that the PD exercises is routinely informing subordinate newspapers regarding which politically sensitive events should not be touched upon or carefully dealt with for alignment with state censorship. One informant provided one example of the censorship from the PD:

“We have a news coordination chat group led by the ‘Big Paper’ [*Dabao*, referring to the PD] that will routinely make a list to inform all subordinate newspapers what kinds of recent topics we should better not touch. For instance, in the current war between Russia and Ukraine, our news reports cannot be recognised as supporting either side, and they may tell us not to have a political stance in or best not to touch upon” (Interviewee A8, 21 December 2022, Online).

Politically sensitive topic avoidance has become a typically accepted guideline in Chinese newspapers and one that will not be questioned. The difference between CEN and the other two cases is that internal censorship in CEN basically stays at this level, while CEPN and

SGN further receive additional censorship for their agent owners' institutional interests. One interviewee from CEN noted:

“CEN typically has more freedom in topic selection and reporting than the other two, and we don't worry too much about the thoughts from 'higher-ups'” (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

This argument was also stressed by the founding leadership of CEN in previous interviews, who highlighted that industry media should be best supervised by professional media organisations rather than governmental bodies or industry interest groups:

“Being managed and supervised by a professional media group rather than a governmental unit allows industry newspapers more room for editorial independence. Thus, we can break free from narrow-mindedness within departments or interest groups and instead focus on the overall situation” (Yi, 2009).

Additionally, interviewee A4 suggested that the high level of “expertise” (Küng, 2023, p. 141) required for specialised energy industry news reporting creates a barrier for the PD to closely guide or intervene in CEN:

“Many news topics we selected are highly specialised to this [energy] industry, and they [the PD leaders] may not be experts in the energy industry news reporting. This indirectly gives CEN a certain degree of autonomy in editorial selections as well. As long as CEN maintains the right orientation for the state's interest and does not challenge the 'red line', there would be no problem for CEN conducting industry news independently” (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

In contrast, both CEPN and SGN are governed by a specialised body rooted in the energy industry. In theory, they may empower CEPN and SGN to access more information sources within this relatively closed industry. However, again, due to the direct vested interest between their agent owners (the NEA and SGCC) and the energy industry subjects they are targeting, CEPN and SGN lose a significant degree of autonomy through the “filter” of their agent owners. Interviewee Liu shared an argument regarding the consequence of being governed by an agent owner who has a vested interest in the energy industry:

“We observed that internal censorship in CEPN is much stricter than CEN, and thus many critical and breaking events cannot be reported” (Interviewee Liu, 6 November 2022, Online).

It has been noted that any information released about SOEs in China, especially for the monopoly giant like SGCC, is often under particularly strict control and censorship (Li,

2012). When recruiting informants from SGN in this study, several potential interviewees refused to participate in this research because “it is inappropriate to speak on behalf of the company.” They exhibited a significantly cautious attitude towards providing any unapproved information about SGCC. As a result, newspaper firms run by non-media SOEs in China are characterised by Chinese scholars as “reporting on self-interests” and “hardly satisfying the actual demands from industry audience” (Ibid.).

At this point, this study argues that the supervision right theoretically empowered by the public to the news outlets had been shifted into a right on public opinion *shaping* and *controlling* and that this was also enjoyed by those agent owners. For instance, the column opened by CEPN for public opinion supervision¹⁷ has become an extended publicity space for the NEA, allowing it to publish pre-filtered official information on how the NEA addressed complaints collected from the public. Similarly, SGN’s strategy also focused on responding to public concerns to avoid the negative image of SGCC rather than proactively self-reporting issues from public concerns¹⁸.

It is important to mention that public opinion supervision practice has been encouraged by China’s top leadership, with the purpose of helping the central authority to reduce the information gap, control the subordinates’ dynamics, and govern local governmental bodies nationwide (under the premise of ensuring political correctness and no challenging the central Party) (Chen, 2017). However, the result of weakened competence or even incompetence in public opinion supervision observed in this study demonstrates the *agency loss* (Jensen and Meckling, 1976) as a result of China’s principal-agency approach to governing state ownership. China’s top authority, as the agent of the public, delegates the authority role of *the principal owner* of the state-owned asset to their agents, i.e., the supervisory unit of each news media organisation, to reduce their difficulties in governing such a large number and diversified newspaper organisations in entire China. However, agent owners inevitably act in their institutional interests—such as avoiding the risks of reporting critical topics or subjectively propagating the positive image tied to themselves.

¹⁷ This is based on the 2021 CEPN Corporate Social Responsibility Report published online. This report summarised how CEPN fulfilled their duties of public opinion supervision in the year of 2021 (p.18). Full report can be accessed: <http://www.cpmg.com.cn/uploads/file1/20220530/629486415651c.pdf>

¹⁸ This can be seen from SGN’s strategy of “Promptly responding questions from the public” to eliminate public doubts as the main approach to fulfil public opinion supervision. Full reportage can be accessed: http://www.zgjx.cn/2020-03/07/c_138852672.htm

Thus, the varying levels of autonomy and strategies towards public opinion supervision among the three cases are a direct reflection of how newspaper culture evolves based on the positions and interests of agent owners. It is important to note that apart from ownership, many other factors, such as leadership, organisational history, and economic censorship (Hassid, 2020) from advertisers, also play significant roles in shaping editorial policies and newsroom autonomy. However, it is evident that the agent owner holds the power of control over the editorial stance and policies in its subsidiary newspaper firm by setting certain rules and priorities that shape the organisational culture. The next sub-section will analyse the role of agent owners in setting priority rules in newspaper firms that shape differentiated norms and beliefs.

6.3.2 Agent Owner and The Rule of “Play it Safe”

In addition to differences in organisational autonomy, this study also investigated the controlling role of agent owners in setting different boundaries for “organisational safety” and shaping the “play it safe” rules for news production. “Safely reporting” has been highlighted by scholars as the primary editorial priority for Chinese press outlets to maintain “organisational safety” (Tong, 2007). This priority rule is also shared by three industry newspaper firms, but, notably, they exhibit varied interpretations on the boundaries of “safety” and tactics for avoiding risk on “organisational safety”. Before analysing these differences and their link to agent owners, it is essential to first understand what this China-specific concept of “safety” means in press management. Based on document analysis and interviews, this study identifies four interdependent dimensions that contribute to their perceived safety:

The first dimension is “the correct political position,” serving as a precondition for safety in Chinese newspaper practice (Long and Shao, 2023; Yin et al., 2024). The second-dimension concerns managing public opinion supervision in the correct direction, which is a key factor when evaluating the risks of certain news reporting by the Chinese press (Wang, 2023a). While there is little cultural difference regarding the first dimension among the three newspaper firms, they present a variety in the basic assumption regarding the boundaries of public opinion supervision. As Sun (2017) and Tong (2007) noticed, the boundaries of what is allowable for public opinion supervision in China are often context-dependent and difficult to define in practice. This study further adds that the agent owner is one key *variable* shaping these boundaries and safety rules for public opinion supervision. The third dimension is the controlling mechanism over the content quality, to avoid editorial errors,

which is also one essential means for maintaining its credibility and authoritativeness. Lastly, this study further finds that safety extends to the avoidance of risks towards the interests of themselves but also their agent owners. These four dimensions establish a “safety” framework that helps Chinese newspaper firms navigate risks. Within this framework, the role of agent owners is crucial: due to the varying interests and demands of different agent owner entities, the boundaries of “safety” differ, leading to varying levels of tolerance for mistakes and risks.

The former analysis of CEPN in its priority rules in controlling risks on multi-platform reporting and editorial selections has illustrated the influence of its agent owner, the NEA, in defining multi-dimensional safety. For example, digital reporting methods have been considered less safe in terms of quality and content correctness compared to print publishing in CEPN, and “important news articles” are typically edited on newspaper samples and published in print before being shared on digital platforms. Furthermore, the Corporate Social Responsibility Report of CEPN(2022) stated that CEPN employed “strict control over the direction of content, ensuring no major errors in news reporting” and upheld the principle of “one standard, one yardstick, and one bottom line” across multi-platform news reporting. Although this rhetoric for unified standardisation echoes the call from NPPA (2017) for improving the lax gatekeeping of online news publishing in China, it does not mean that the distinct characteristics and demands of online news production and delivery should be overlooked. In the face of the higher demands for timeliness and flexibility in digital news, CEPN has not actively adjusted solutions to adapt. Instead, it retreats to the traditional process to avoid potential mistakes and uncertainties in digital news reporting.

While some interviewees consider this approach as a conservative strategy of self-protection, others suggest this is a result of compromising the demands of its supervisory entity. One CEPN member noted:

“Due to the specificity of our supervisor unit, we are unable to be open-minded, innovative, and timely in our news reporting to develop our digital reach. We must accept more management from the superior, such as internal quality control and safety control. Thus, in terms of timeliness, for instance, we hardly catch up with the digital media competitors” (Interviewee A6, 21 November 2022, Online).

This comment suggests the misalignment of interests between CEPN as a newspaper firm and its agent owner NEA as a governmental entity. However, as a subordinate unit, newspaper staff tend to compromise with the guidelines set by higher authorities and may

even assist in pursuing the interests of the agent owner. Interviewee A6's comment highlights the "specificity" of its agent owner, the NEA, a governmental department overseeing the energy sector under the State Council. In China, the governmental system is characterised by "upward accountability" (Bardhan, 2020), meaning government officials are accountable to higher authorities rather than the public (Wu, 2012). Consequently, officials, especially at lower units, often engage in blame avoidance and risk avoidance to protect their political careers (Zhou, 2022). Numerous cases have documented how Chinese officials have worked to block information and prevent media coverage of their problems (Cai, 2014). Although it cannot be assumed that all government officials have "problems," blame- and risk avoidance are common informal norms in Chinese governmental cultures. For instance, an interview with local officials by the central Party journal *China Comment* revealed such a prevalent belief: "Better not do it than do it with uncertainty" (Bai et al., 2020). And this underlying assumption was also observed by CEPN's internal members:

"Governmental bodies only focus on whether the news about themselves can be reported safely; they do not care how innovative or remarkable the form of news reporting is" (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

Consequently, the NEA, as a governmental body, prefers traditional media channels like newspapers for delivering governmental news. This preference has also shaped CEPN members' understanding of the significance of digital versus print tasks when balancing uncertainties. An internal member observed that the NEA shares only news content published by the newspaper, rather than CEPN's digital outputs, on its official website and social media accounts:

"This has created a rule over and over again that everything must be based on the newspaper, which is considered the most important and safest" (Interviewee A9, 15 November, Online).

Thus, CEPN's established rules for maintaining "safety" have been significantly influenced by its agent owner's overarching preferences and priorities, fostering a culture that favours risk avoidance and stability over innovation and digital adaptation.

Compared to CEPN, the safety concerns at SGN also cover the four dimensions but with a nuanced emphasis placed on safeguarding the interests of its agent owner, SGCC, as an SOE. According to the statement of SGN (2019), safety controlling means "adhering to the correct political direction and public opinion guidance, with no major principled errors or significant quality issues in its performance." In practice, "safety control" at SGN additionally concerns

any risks and errors that could impact the public image, corporate reputation, and also government relations of its agent owner SGCC. This can be seen from SGN's strict guidelines in managing digital news reporting for SGCC described by its internal member Wang (2022):

“Safety is the prerequisite for all work. Safety can be likened to ‘1’, while other tasks can be denoted by ‘0’. The saying ‘one mistake could lead to ten thousand failures’ holds true. The work of corporate news reporting faces a more complex, sensitive, and fragile internal and external environment compared to general media outlets, making the safety of news production extremely important... The standard [of digital news reporting] should align with the standards of print media and strictly follow the ‘three reviews and three proofreads’ system for the digital editorial team. It should avoid relying solely on computer screens and backend systems to review and approve since these pose significant risks and potential pitfalls. Instead, prioritising using printed samples for ‘three reviews and three proofreads’, especially for important reportages” (P.77).

This interpretation underscores the heightened complexity, sensitivity, and vulnerability SGN faces in managing corporate news, especially given its dual role of informing the public while protecting the interests of its agent owner, SGCC. This dual role amplifies the need for rigorous control measures to ensure the content not only adheres to political and quality standards but also preserves SGCC's image and aligns with government expectations towards SOEs.

Former analysis on CEN, in contrast, illustrates a more relaxed and flexible approach to “safety,” with greater autonomy in editorial decisions and strategy-making. Although its members are also concerned with the four dimensions of organisational safety, CEN presents a higher level of interest alignment with its agent owner, which results in greater autonomy in editorial policies and self-driven experimentation. Interviews with the digital staff at CEN indicate that its digital team adopts a self-reliant approach, striving to distinguish itself from traditional print norms. Especially regarding the fourth dimension, CEN stands out because its institutional interests align closely with those of its agent owner, PD, due to its shared identity as a press organisation. This simplifies CEN's approach to “safety” and fosters a culture that respects editorial autonomy. Thus, CEN experiences fewer constraints on “safety control” compared to other cases, where institutional objectives diverge less distinctively from purely journalistic goals and press interests.

Through comparing the three cases, it is notable that safety control is an essential norm for each Chinese newspaper to reduce risk and errors in daily operations. It is acknowledged that being “risk averse” is a typical human nature (Ross, 1981), although attitudes towards

risk often vary from subjectivity (March and Shapira, 1987). Psychologists have indicated that risks and uncertainty often generate fear and anxiety, which are significant motivations for avoidance behaviour (Hofstede, 2001; Maner and Schmidt, 2006). However, when defining the boundaries of what is considered “safe” or “risky” in Chinese newspaper organisations, this study observes that these definitions are largely influenced by the expectations and requirements of the agent owners. Non-media agent owners, whether governmental institutions like NEA or non-media corporate entities like SGCC, possess strong motivations to maintain their own institutional reputations. Furthermore, the agent owner’s risk-averse intent regarding safety control not only transmits to a subordinary newspaper firm but also influences the guiding rules for “play it safe.” Additionally, this study demonstrates that when newspaper firms and their agent owners share a high level of institutional interests, agency loss can be better managed, facilitating greater autonomy and a higher tolerance for mistakes compared to cases where interests are misaligned in nature. This finding will be examined in greater detail in the following chapter.

6.4 Conclusion

Drawing on agency theory from economics, this chapter offers a nuanced contribution to the oversimplified understanding of media ownership in the Chinese press sector. Through document analysis and interview data, it delineates Chinese newspaper ownership into two layers: the principal owner (the state, representing the people) and the agent owner (the supervisory and sponsor entity executing ownership rights and responsibilities on behalf of the state). This multi-case study argues that state ownership in China exerts broad influence over cultural commonalities across Chinese newspapers at the macro level, while agent owners shape cultural distinctions between newspapers through their micro-level roles.

The core function of state ownership lies in creating an institutional foundation that legitimises the power exercised by both the state and agent owners, thereby establishing power distribution across ownership layers. In terms of cultural commonalities, this study finds that state ownership directly fosters the self-identification of newspapers as state media, amplifies the central authority’s capacity to govern and mobilise newspapers nationwide, and provides news publishers with reputational and positional advantages. Furthermore, state ownership drives synchronous and symbolic compliance among Chinese newspaper firms towards the state-led media convergence strategy. Although commercial culture is not directly linked to state ownership, the singularity of press ownership forms in China intensifies the concentration of power and resources and strengthens the reliance between

advertisers and state-owned media outlets. When examining cultural differences, the influence of the agent owner becomes more apparent and direct. Fundamentally, the agency-based approach to state ownership legitimises the authority of the agent owner in defining the boundaries of organisational autonomy and organisational safety. These boundaries, however, are influenced by the distinct values, objectives, and interests of each agent owner, resulting in varied editorial policies and risk management strategies across different newspaper firms.

Indeed, China's state ownership arrangement establishes a multi-layered principal-agent chain as the structural foundation for media governance across regional and industry contexts. However, the current analysis of the agent owner's impact on cultural differences highlights agency loss arising from institutional interest misalignment within the lengthy principal-agent chain. When the agent owner's institutional priorities diverge from those of the subsidiary newspaper firm, this misalignment undermines the newspaper firm's journalistic function and autonomy. As a result, the principal owner faces multi-faceted agency loss, such as information asymmetry and eroded innovation incentives in newspaper firms, which can significantly weaken its governance efficacy. Furthermore, the excessive use of legitimate ownership rights by agent owners to serve their interests also hinders the information flow between the state, media, and the public, significantly weakening the ability of Chinese newspaper firms to serve the public interest.

In the following chapter, this study will focus on how this agency approach has shaped cultural constraints and advantages that influence the innovative capabilities of three Chinese newspapers in digital adaptation.

7 Ownership and Cultural Constraints in Media Innovation

This chapter addresses the final research question—to what extent does media ownership act as a source of cultural constraint towards innovative attempts among China’s industrial newspaper firms? Utilising a motivational analysis framework, it identifies three innovation tendencies—self-drive, state compliance, and change aversion—present in varying degrees across firms in this study. These competing motivations create cultural tensions within the Chinese press for building innovation capabilities. The chapter concludes by examining the impact of China’s media ownership on these dynamics and the implications for developing innovation capabilities within newspaper firms.

7.1 A Motivation Lens to Chinese Newspaper Innovation

According to Golembiewski (2000), motivations refer to underlying reasons driving certain organisational behaviours to be initiated and maintained to achieve particular purposes. Drawing on the motivation-based analysis based on SDT (Deci and Ryan, 2012), this study observes that innovation behaviours within Chinese newspaper firms are primarily shaped by three concurrently existing motives, i.e., *self-drive*, *state compliance*, and *aversion to change*. Specifically in this multi-case study, self-motivated innovations primarily manifest their organisational interest demand in self-development with autonomous motives to change, whereas state-compliant innovations are mainly driven by “controlled motivations” (Hagger et al., 2014), such as seeking recognition and avoiding punishment from superior entities. Furthermore, the change-averse approach to innovation captured by this study not only reflects limited motives to change but also unfolds their conscious preference of avoiding potential risks and maintaining the status quo. Each motivational approach will be examined by the evidence collected from interviews and public documents, with a further analysis of how media ownership is involved in the cultural dynamics between motivations and innovation goals.

7.1.1 Self-Motivated Innovation

One overarching finding of this section is that *self-motivated* innovations—initiatives driven by the autonomous development goals of newspaper organisations—are primarily directed towards business interests. The three industry newspapers studied, CEN, CEPN, and SGN, all employ diversification strategies to innovate their revenue models, maximising economic efficiency and risk distribution (Doyle, 2013b). The evidence of self-motivated innovations

indicates a strong inclination among Chinese newspaper firms to explore new business areas. Despite commonalities, there are notable differences in specific innovation choices and implementation capabilities of each newspaper firm. This study attributes these variations mainly to differences in each firm's *resource endowments* and *strategic capabilities* for digital adaptation at the organisational level, which are largely shaped by the firm's agent owner.

The first self-motivated innovation is the diversification of revenue sources through audio-visual content production and distribution. Notably, three firms have entered the audio-visual and video business, making video content an essential part of their product offerings. This shift illustrates a *convergence* of industry-level capabilities for the growing market demand for audio-visual media goods and services (Oliver, 2019). However, from a comparative perspective, CEPN and SGN have outpaced CEN by launching audio-visual film production businesses, presenting earlier and more substantial investments in reconfiguring and renewing resources. Therefore, using Teece's (2014) terminology for describing strategic activities that develop firms' adaptive capabilities to external dynamics, CEPN and SGN demonstrate stronger "seizing" and "transforming" capabilities compared to CEN.

From a temporal perspective, the establishment of the film and television businesses by CEPN and SGN predates even the founding time of CEN (i.e., the year 2009), giving them a temporal advantage. According to its official portfolio, CEPN established its licensed television station, *China Power Television* (CPTV), in 2008. Regarding SGN, the earliest mention of its film and television business was in one paper published in a Chinese academic journal in media studies in 2008 (Pang, 2008), which reads,

"State Grid News has taken *State Grid Television* (SGTV) as the core base to promote and develop audio-visual film and television business, establishing a developmental system for entering film and television industry" (p. 13).

Furthermore, according to publicly available lists from China's National Radio and Television Administration¹⁹, the media groups to which CEPN and SGN belong have obtained the Radio and Television Program Production and Operation License before 2009. In contrast, CEN neither holds this license nor has its television station. It is worth noting

¹⁹ National Radio and Television Administration is the ministry-level unit under China's State Council responsible for regulating and supervising the television and radio industries.

that the media conglomerate that CEN is based invested in establishing *Da Tang Fengyun* (Beijing) Film and Television Production Company in 2012, obtaining the license. However, as the company operates independently from CEN's daily functions, this represents a limited integration of resources between the two. As Interviewee A3 introduced, the responsible team overseeing the video content business at CEN is the Audio-Visual Content Department, primarily focusing on short video production and distribution instead of film and television productions. Thus, compared to the other two newspapers, CEN started relatively late in the video business and has not yet developed a robust organisational structure specifically dedicated to the film and television business.

More importantly, CEPN and SGN have invested more workforce and material resources (e.g., in-house studios and filming equipment) in this new business than CEN. Although Chinese newspaper firms often do not make their financial information publicly available, documents like recruitment notices, media reports, and corporate reports are also valuable for gaining insights into organisational activities related to resource renewal. For the case of CEPN, its internal member Guan (2021) reports online that CEPN has equipped journalists with a range of advanced tools for digital reporting, including smartphones, advanced microphones, handheld gimbals, immersive cameras, drones, 5G livestream encoders, and other related technologies (p.19). Besides, CEPN's internal employees, Qiu and Wang (2022), also filmed the working environment of its broadcasting studio for daily content production, as shown in Figure 7-1.



Figure 7-1. “A set of screenshots from a Vlog video capturing CEPN’s in-house studio and its personnel”, Quickly! Take A Look at How Journalists Prepare for Their On-site Reporting! Qiu and Wang (2022)

As an interviewee introduced, CEPN has approximately 20 members within its film and television team, and its published recruitment notice (CEMG, 2023) shows more professionals were recruited to this team, including one on-screen host, one director, and two script planners in 2023. According to the video content lists published on its official website²⁰, CEPN's video business primarily involves producing documentaries, commercial and public service advertisements, educational videos, news reports, short videos, and streaming services. Interviewee A4 suggests that CEPN's film and television department has become "the most profitable department in CEPN in recent years" (12 November 2022, Online). One advertiser, who has a close connection with CEPN, echoes the above comment:

"CEPN's video team currently is particularly well-received within the state-owned enterprises in the power sector. They are producing thousands of videos each year, generating substantial revenues" (Interviewee A2, 6 November 2022, Online).

Regarding SGN, it has been more rapidly expanding its video business even compared to CEPN. SGN's editor-in-chief, Wang (2023b), stated that SGN established its short video department in 2019, producing at least five original short videos daily in 2023 by leveraging the strengths of its integrated journalist stations, grassroots correspondents, and staff at SGCC. According to its official report, the proportion of video production in SGN's overall content output, including short videos and special feature films, has exceeded 50% (Sun et al., 2022), representing a significant shift in the volume of its offerings. SGN's on-screen journalist Zhang (2022) illustrated its Film and Television Centre's working environment and basic hardware equipment in her Vlog (see Figure 7-2).

²⁰ CPTV's official website is <http://www.cptv.com.cn/>

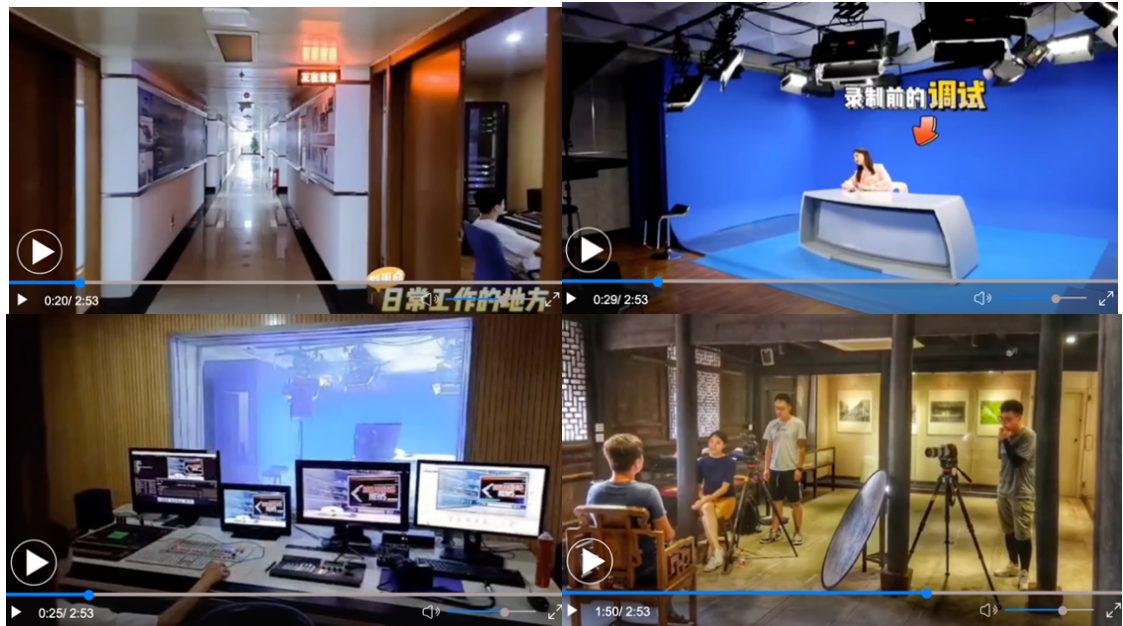


Figure 7-2. “A set of screenshots from a Vlog video captured SGN’s Film and Television Centre’s in-house environment and on-location filming conditions”, Zhang Xuefei’s Vlog, Zhang (2022)

In addition to these invested resources within the department, what cannot be ignored is that SGN is also greatly benefiting from the rich resources and strong capacity for resource mobilisation of its agent owner, SGCC. For instance, SGN leverages its established mechanism to mobilise resources possessed by press stations located at branch offices of SGCC across the country (see Chapter 5), such as diverse story sources, skilled personnel, and valuable local contacts, to enhance its capabilities in multi-media production. In this aspect, both CEPN and CEN are unable to match. Furthermore, SGN also presents more strength in outsourcing contacts for video content distribution. In addition to successfully distributing their multiple documentary films on China’s largest television channel, *China Central Television*, and multiple large online platforms, Interviewee A10 from SGN discloses that SGN also cooperates with *Warner Bros. Discovery* in both filming and distributing serial documentary films, namely “Lighting Up Ali, an Engineer’s Diary” (released in May 2022)²¹ to overseas markets. The rapid growth of the audio-visual content business in SGN has been well-noticed by internal members:

“Currently, the business volume of the audio-visual team is substantial, with high demand and excellent business performance. Our self-produced documentaries have received multiple awards in China and even collaborated with television stations abroad” (Interviewee 10, 17 August 2023, Online).

²¹ This documentary tells stories about how SGCC builds Power Infrastructures in the Ali region on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau to help residents get electricity.

In comparison, CEN's expansion into the audio-visual business is limited compared to CEPN and SGN in terms of resource renewal. CEN does not yet have its own broadcasting studio or television station and experiences a shortage of skilled manpower (in Chapter 5). Although compared to the other two firms, CEN has a relatively slow pace and weaker approach to building capabilities for audio-visual product innovation, it has still garnered positive internal recognition for progress relative to its past performance:

“The video department has become the fastest-growing department [at CEN] in recent two years” (Interviewee A11, 18 August 2023, Beijing).

“The [video] team has further recruited six young individuals from 2021 to 2022; they are doing on-screen hosts, video editing, script planning, and operation” (Interviewee A5, 19 November 2022, Online).

Given limitations in production capacity for film and video production, CEN's audio-visual business growth is now more presented through short video production and distribution. Internal members suggested that CEN is strategically directing its efforts towards meeting the increasing demand from advertisers for distributing branded content through short videos:

“Advertising has gradually shifted from text-based mediums to short video and streaming platforms, such as *Douyin*. Advertisers are keen to have their branded videos featured through our official accounts on short video platforms” (Interviewee A5, 19 November 2022, Online).

Through creating short videos that cater to popular tastes and the algorithmic recommendation rules of digital platforms (see Chapter 5), CEN now has 1,251,000 subscribers to its account²² on *Douyin*. “Regardless of the size of the follower base, our ultimate objective still relies on it for generating revenues,” Interviewee A3 addressed. In other words, CEN is trying to monetise its “attention” resource (e.g., viewing traffic and audience base) (Davenport and Beck, 2001) by supplying video content placement and live streaming services for advertisers from the energy sector to generate advertising revenues. However, this study notices that converting traffic and online audience base into revenues employed by CEN does not yield as much revenue as the approach adopted by CEPN and SGN of being an original video content creator:

“Monetising traffic on digital platforms is challenging for us since most traffic dividends are captured by large platforms like *Douyin*. Short video platforms also restrict direct branded content if we don't pay them for traffic benefits. Thus,

²² The figure was accessed on 22 November 2023, via <https://v.douyin.com/iRXAyQJY/> 1@5.com 06/02

it is difficult for us to balance interests between us, advertisers, audiences, and digital platforms” (Interviewee A5, 19 November 2022, Online).

Although internal members recognised monetising online traffic as one innovative tactic for digital growth, its potential for economic gains is considered limited. This echoes the monetisation challenges experienced by many audio-visual content producers who are dependent on digital platforms (Idiz and Poell, 2024). Furthermore, CEN’s stronger dependence on online platforms for developing audio-visual products also suggests a weak capability in terms of independently developing new resources.

The second noteworthy self-motivated innovation among the three newspaper firms is the development of value-added products and services based on information technology, such as public opinion monitoring and knowledge databases. CEN and CEPN have entered China’s growing public opinion monitoring market as *upstream suppliers*. Public opinion monitoring (輿情監測), which involves collecting data on online expression, media reporting, and offering forewarning, management, and reporting services (Duan, 2015; Hou, 2017), has grown significantly with the rise of social media (Zhang and Vos, 2014). While global news agencies, such as *BBC Monitoring* (BBC, no date), have been offering these services, China’s market has expanded notably since 2016 (Zheng and Wang, 2022). Driven by government directives to shape online sentiment and growing market demand, authoritative news outlets have become major suppliers in China (Duan, 2015; Liu, 2014; Wang, 2023a). One well-known example is the *People’s Internet Public Opinion Data Centre*, which reported profits exceeding 23 million RMB (approximately three million USD) from its monitoring business in 2022 (People’s Daily Online, 2023). With advantageous credibility and authoritativeness, China’s newspaper firms actively seek a share in this booming market (Liu, 2014).

Based on the *Tianyancha* database, CEN has invested in and established a new company for software and IT services through a joint venture in 2018. This has successfully delivered public opinion monitoring services and media content management systems to Beijing’s district government and Gansu Province’s public security bureau. Interviewee A13 commented:

“This new method has greatly contributed to our overall income...and undoubtedly created new profit opportunities for our business” (18 August 2023, Beijing).

This internal member's perspective reflects a positive recognition and support for self-motivated innovation aimed at profitability. Additionally, CEN's strategic expansion into information technology-based products and services, such as public opinion monitoring and media content management, demonstrates its "managerial sensing skills" (Oliver, 2018, p. 288) to identify and effectively integrate resources and expertise from external sources to enrich its offerings.

However, CEPN entered the public opinion monitoring market faster than CEN. According to its official portfolio, CEPN established its public opinion monitoring office in 2012, employing 20 data analysts. Additionally, this study found a dedicated section on CEPN's news website that regularly publishes paid monitoring reports on the electric industry. Furthermore, in 2021, CEPN's "Public Opinion Information Collection System" was selected by China's press regulator NPPA as a model of the innovative "Media plus Government and Business Service" approach.

Although no public data specifies their exact revenues in this area, a horizontal comparison shows that CEPN outperforms CEN in both market timing and service maturity. However, in a vertical comparison, both firms have demonstrated their capabilities to develop resources for entering the public opinion monitoring market. In contrast, there is no evidence indicating that SGN has ventured into such businesses. Bidding notices from the *Tianyancha* database reveal that companies affiliated with SGCC often procure third-party monitoring services. While SGN shows limited interest in entering the public opinion monitoring market, it has not entirely neglected value-added information services.

The knowledge database service is another value-added information technology area where all three newspaper firms focus on digital adaptation. This innovation revolves around transforming their rich content assets into knowledge database resources, reconfiguring them to diversify their business models for digital growth. CEPN has launched its database centre webpage, which constantly records media reports, governmental documents, industry statistics, and other historical documents to offer paid membership for both companies and individuals. In 2023, CEPN released a tender announcement to procure third-party information technology services to construct its "All-Media Resource Repository"²³. Similarly, CEN is also constructing an in-house database (CEN, 2014) and experimenting

²³ This document can be accessed via <http://bulletin.cebpubservice.com/resultBulletin/2023-01-28/9123152.html>

with membership for the online knowledge-based paid platform (see Figure 7-3), combining it with offline training courses.



Figure 7-3. A Screen Shot of the Mobile Page of CEN's "Energy Lecture Theatre", November 2022

SGN launched columns of *China Electricity Encyclopaedia* on its mobile news application, based on the establishment of its knowledge resource database, offering a paywall for accessing industry data, such as patent information, industry standards, and digital publications (see Figure 7-4).



Figure 7-4. A Screenshot of the Knowledge-based Paid Services on SGN's Official News Mobile Application *Grid Headlines*, November 2023

Although there is no public information on the contribution of these new businesses to the three firms' overall revenues and specific launch dates, this self-motivated innovation demonstrates their adaptive capabilities to transform traditional print media firms into diversified suppliers of value-added information services.

In addition to audio-visual content and value-added information services, the final self-motivated innovation identified in this study relates to diversified non-media business activities. While both CEN and CEPN show a strong interest in developing non-media businesses, SGN remains focused on its media operation. Among the three cases, CEPN is a pioneer in diversification, having ventured into non-media sectors such as real estate and hotel management since 1993 and tourism services since 2012²⁴. Its recent expansion includes the establishment of an energy service company in 2020 focusing on electricity sales, energy equipment, and contractual energy management. In comparison, CEN demonstrates a strong motive to move downstream in its value chain by organising large-scale industry conferences and exhibitions to enhance its revenue. According to *Tianyancha*, CEN has established a sub-company specialised in large-scale industry event organising through a joint venture in 2018. As revealed by Interviewee Judy, CEN's overall revenues have been increasingly coming from its event services in recent years. This vertical

²⁴ The official document's link is <http://www.cpmg.com.cn/Show/index/cid/20/id/685.html>

expansion has effectively enhanced CEN's long-term sustainability and growth in a challenging digital era.

While both CEN and CEPN demonstrate their adaptive capabilities by developing non-media competencies for diversified business growth, SGN remains focused on its media business. Industry professionals suggest that SGN lacks motives to expand into non-media revenue sources due to limited financial pressure:

“Well-funded newspapers like SGN can afford to concentrate on their core media operations without the pressing need to seek alternative revenue streams” (Interviewee Liu, 6 November 2022, Online).

Liu's comment suggests that financial pressure can be a key factor motivating newspaper firms to adopt diversified business models, aiming to mitigate risks and expand revenue streams (Doyle, 2002). The extent of this financial pressure is primarily influenced by the *strength* of the backing from the agent owner:

“SGN has access to the most substantial resources [from SGCC], followed by CEPN. CEN is expected to be ranked last—what PD provides is mostly ‘soft’ resource support, rather than ‘hard’ investments” (Interviewee Liu, 6 November 2022, Online).

According to Liu, although the three newspaper firms' agent owners all own strong resource capacities, their supports can be differentiated in the nature and the extent of mobilising resources. Based on interviews with internal members, CEN receives the least tangible resource backing from its agent owner among the three, and it also exhibits relatively weak and slow capabilities in developing new business compared to CEPN and SGN in their common business areas, such as audio-visual and value-added services. This implies that state ownership in China influences the speed, progress, and strategic choices of each newspaper firm's innovations through the differing resources, strategic priorities, and capacities of their agent owners. This finding aligns with the earlier study by Krumsvik et al. (2013b), which demonstrates that newspaper owners with stronger economic resources and strategic capacities, such as large corporations, are more likely to positively influence their newspaper firms' ability to develop digital services, compared to those under independent ownership.

This study, however, finds little evidence that state ownership acts as a source of cultural constraints on self-motivated innovations. All comments from interviewees are positive and supportive of initiatives driven by autonomous interests in business innovation. Their

positive sentiments reflect a collective acknowledgement of the value of these innovations in enhancing revenues and organisational reputation. This illustrates self-motivated innovations encounter limited cultural constraints at the organisational level, primarily because their objectives often align with the organisation's commercial interests and overall benefits. Additionally, these innovations also tend to be incremental and do not significantly disrupt existing organisational processes or core business functions. However, when it comes to reconfiguring existing processes, newspaper firms tend to face more significant challenges in terms of cultural change. The upcoming sub-sections explore one such cultural constraint, focusing on state compliance as another key motive influencing their innovative behaviours.

7.1.2 State-Compliant Innovation

This section uncovers a shared innovative behaviour among three newspaper firms, driven primarily by motives for *state compliance*. The nature of state-compliant innovation lies in controlled motivations to meet policy expectations and avoid punishment from regulators. The prevalent practice of Converging Media Construction in China's newspaper industry serves as a representative case, shedding light on the role of media ownership in shaping compliance-driven change. This study has observed that China's state-led media convergence strategy has propelled change initiation regarding the integration of newsrooms, technology applications, experimentation within new methods for state-mandated standards, and the cultivation of collective awareness of media convergence. However, given that the fundamental motive for Converging Media Construction primarily serves superior authorities rather than audience needs, practitioners express a widespread lack of autonomous motivation, resulting in inadequate strategic planning and unclear visions at the organisational level.

As mentioned previously, the concept of media convergence has developed into a national media strategy in China since 2014, aiming to maintain the Party's leadership in controlling public ideology through strengthening state media's integrated capability in multi-channel reach and influence (Chen and Yang, 2015). Alongside subsequent detailed policies (see Section 3.2), media convergence has evolved into a central policy topic within China's contemporary media policy (Xiong and Zhang, 2018). The official guiding objective is the *depth* of integration between the legacy and the digital in terms of institutional mechanisms, policy measures, process management, talent, and technologies (Chen and Yang, 2015). The latest regulation update is the *Five Criteria* formulated by NPPA (2023b) for Chinese

newspaper firms to self-examine their implementing progress of Converging Media Construction and report to their supervisory entities and ultimately to NPPA. The five criteria include:

“1) Whether they firmly implement the decisions and deployments of the central CCP and actively promote the construction of new mainstream media in the newspaper industry; 2) whether they are building the Converging Media Matrix; 3) whether they have established an integrated system and mechanism that adapts to the production and dissemination of converging media; 4) whether there is a unified orientation and management requirements for the subsidiary newspapers and new media; and 5) whether their new media operations face issues of non-standard management or other serious violations of laws and regulations.”

Emphasising the press' primary role in serving the ruling Party, these criteria compel all Chinese newspaper firms to develop an integrated mechanism for uniformly managing their multiple delivery channels. The current study has discussed the homogenous behaviour of Chinese newspapers in meeting top authority standards regarding media convergence in Chapter 5. To underscore their compliance and progress, Chinese newspaper firms often employ Converging Media Construction as a major narrative to show their innovative endeavours in public documents. Additionally, official discourse also links innovativeness with the achievement of Chinese newspapers in implementing media convergence policy. For instance, since 2021, NPPA has annually called for exemplar “innovation cases” nationwide, selecting outstanding instances exhibiting “in-depth convergence”. NPPA's public records show that cases from both SGN and CEPN have been selected, receiving official recognition for their innovativeness.

For example, in 2023, SGN was chosen by NPPA due to its “Converging Media Platform” project. Technologically, SGN introduces that they have adopted information technologies to integrate news resources, combining live data analysis to track and visualise the workflow and digital influence across digital platforms at its media centre office (see Figure 7-5). Additionally, SGN has adopted a “mobile-first, video-first” approach to innovating its media production and distribution process (Wang, 2023b) and established its Central Kitchen Model by integrating its production resources with distribution resources through centralised scheduling and oversight.



Figure 7-5. Screenshots from an Introductory Video of the Converging Media Data Visualisation Platform in SGN, published by the official account of SGN on Weibo, 2023

Similarly, CEN and CEPN both publicly reported that they have been adhering to the official requirement for mechanism reconstruction, incorporating practices like implementing the Central-Kitchen Model with “one-time collection, diverse generation, and multi-channel dissemination”. Technologically, CEPN and CEN both adopted new editorial software systems to facilitate media database building and workflow tracking. For example, CEPN has introduced a new digital editorial system in 2020, namely “Electric Power Little Chef”(电力小厨), with the funding (10 million RMB) from China’s Ministry of Finance (Hao and Ren, 2020). Similarly, CEN has also updated its online editorial system in recent years to better facilitate centralised management of media resources in production and distribution:

“We have applied a new editing system for journalists and editors into their daily workflow. It makes the workflow more traceable: journalists upload and record their news articles through this software system, and the editors will review, revise, and finalise the pages for publication all via this system” (Interviewee A11, 18 August 2023, Beijing).

Additionally, three newspaper firms have been actively promoting their constructed Converging Media Matrix (see Figure 7-6). Despite different design features, the logic behind the “matrix” remains the same, reflecting centralised management of distribution resources, which typically involves *self-owned platforms* (mobile news application, news website, digital newspaper, print publication) and *reliant platforms* (video and streaming platforms, social media platforms, news aggregators) (see Figure 5-5).

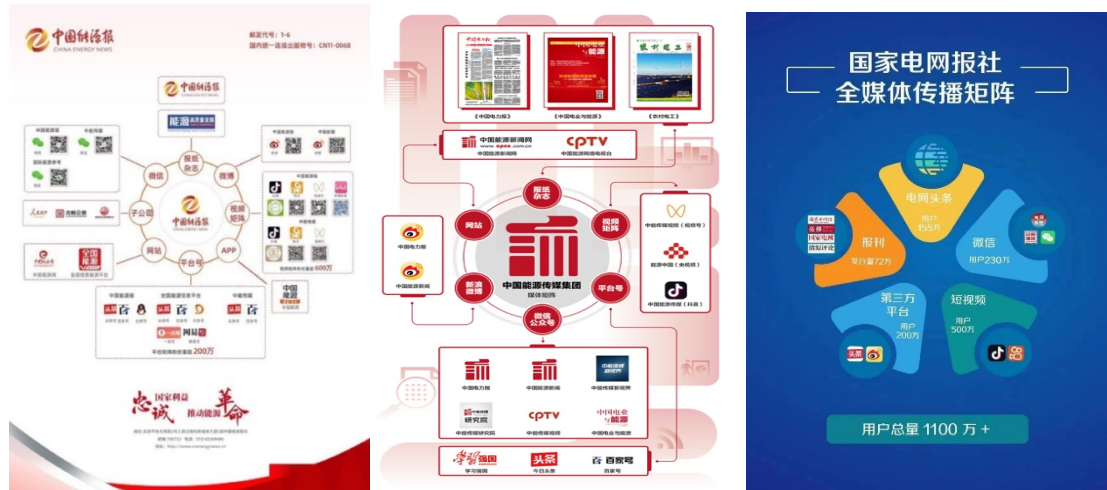


Figure 7-6. Converging Media Matrix Posters of (from l-r) CEN, CEPN, and SGN, Accessed Online in November 2023.

However, this study finds a hidden gap between the actual experiences disclosed by internal members and the positive portrayals presented by newspaper firms in public reporting. Interviews reveal that although internal members acknowledged the importance of media convergence, these innovative initiatives, which are driven by state compliance, are not thoroughly implemented, and the core issue of media convergence remains unresolved: the entrenched resource allocation and processes, including manpower, skills, paradigms, and value propositions, are far from integrated. As Interviewee A9 noted, the current situation is “more like a try for physical integration but not yet chemically converged” (15 November 2022, Online). Other interviewees similarly stated:

“We are trying to integrate new media and the newspaper editorial department. However, it’s more like ‘adding A to B’, not a true convergence. People working on the newspaper and those in digital editorial still belong to two separate teams, with occasional rotations between them. It remains a simple addition without true integration. It hasn’t had much impact on our workflow; it remains the same as it was before” (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

“The digital department occasionally requested help from us to share resources such as contacts with industry experts. But in our daily work process, each department remains to operate independently. I feel we still have a disconnect between departments and a sense of isolation among members of different teams. And so are news topic selections, each team have its own, making it difficult to actively engage in each other’s work” (Interviewee A13, 18 August 2023, Online).

“I don’t think this works since the organisational structure hasn’t been fully streamlined, and converged practice still relies on informal, spontaneous collaboration” (Interviewee A5, 19 November 2022, Online).

“I think the current progress of ‘Converging Media Construction’ is sporadic integration, with the state quo mostly maintained” (Interviewee Judy, 19 November 2022, Online).

Aligned with Chapter 5’s findings, there are limited motivations for resource sharing between the print and digital teams due to their different process and priorities. The cross-departmental collaboration for converging media reporting is also often event-based rather than routine-based, suggesting weak capabilities in reconstructing existing resources for efficiency. An earlier study suggested that Chinese editors and journalists were showing “non-cooperation” and “non-acceptance”, arguing China’s media convergence practice at the local press is “a gesture of compliance” (Yin and Liu, 2014). Although similarly highlighting the symbolic engagement in Converging Media Construction among three cases, the current study also observed the well-improved acceptance among interviewed professionals towards this state-led strategy. Some interviewees expect this state-led strategy to bring about tangible innovations, and some interviewees even associate Converging Media Construction as one essential criterion to self-evaluate the firm’s innovativeness. Despite the positive acknowledgement from interviewees regarding the importance of Converging Media Construction, this study finds that, compared to self-motivated innovations, state-compliant innovations demonstrate significantly weaker capabilities among Chinese newspaper firms in renewing and reconfiguring their *existing* resources, skills, and capabilities.

Interviewees commonly indicated that they received insufficient guidance from leadership on the next steps and specific goals related to the media convergence policy, and they noted limited tangible changes in establishing new processes and routines. This implies that Chinese newspaper firms exhibit weak capabilities in “knowledge-based” resource renewal, especially in terms of communicating clear strategic visions and plans, and also in “tangible” resource reconfiguration for rebuilding their entrenched routine and processes (Oliver, 2018). Due to a lack of clear visions and practical guidance and the existence of “old” routines and processes, media professionals are facing a state of confusion:

“Most newspaper organisations are still exploring and haven’t found a successful path for it yet. Everyone says we need to support the tasks for media convergence. The question is we don’t know how we should do it specifically for what specific goals” (Interviewee A12, 18 August 2023, Beijing).

“The formalisation of media convergence is too symbolic. There is no need to pursue so-called convergence just for the sake of it. News is a product meant for the audience; not everything needs to be made into a short video or multi-media

format. The form is not important; what matters is whether the audience understands the meaning of news. But today's media convergence has become overly formalised" (Interviewee 14, 19 September 2023, Online).

Regarding the cultural constraints on developing adaptive capabilities within China's media convergence strategic practice, this study finds a critical issue in compliance innovations: the concealed gap between decision-makers and practitioners in measuring the values and expectations of media convergence strategy has resulted in conflicting priorities. From a motivation-based perspective, this concealed gap has been constraining newspaper practitioners' enthusiasm and proactiveness towards the strategy. As stated previously, the starting point of this state-led media convergence strategy is to consolidate ideology and serve national governance. However, when probing how practitioners would assess the value and expectations of any actions in media innovation, the responses from interviewees consistently emphasised the primary goal of delivering value to the audience:

"I believe the utmost importance lies in gaining recognition from the industry audience, attributed to our high-quality reporting and enhanced readability tailored for both specialised and non-specialised audiences to understand and get interested in" (Interviewee A10, 17 August 2023, Online).

"For me, it should be three criteria. The first is receiving endorsement from the industry audience and the enterprises within the energy industry; the second is our staff can gain a sense of value or achievement. The third is substantial economic returns" (Interviewee A12, 18 August 2023, Beijing).

"I think the most important thing is the recognition from readers, audiences, and users. Hard data indicators help us evaluate our popularity, positive approval, and feedback from our audience, particularly regarding specialised content, the novelty in news reporting, and in-depth reporting, which are even vitally important. Secondly, peer recognition holds equal importance. When I went to Shanghai for an interview, one journalist from another media organisation praised the quality of our paper, which was immensely gratifying. The last one is the recognition from our supervisory entity" (Interviewee A13, 18 August 2023, Online).

"The most significant thing is the recognition from the industry actors, this is the core [criterion]" (Interviewee A8, 21 December 2022, Online).

Their consistent emphasis on audiences, readers, or industry users as the primary source for deriving meaning and value from any innovative initiatives reflects that gaining audience recognition is a primary motivator for media convergence among practitioners. However, audience recognition, while essential, is not the primary concern of the newspaper leadership. China's top leader, Xi Jinping (2019), has clearly emphasised the value of media convergence lies in "strengthening mainstream ideology and public opinion" and "ensuring

the voice of the Party is disseminated more widely and deeply.” Correspondingly, media management in Chinese newspapers also consistently adopts a high-profile posture to demonstrate compliance and responsiveness to any calls from the Party (Chen and Yang, 2015). For instance, the top manager of SGN, Zheng Lin (2022), makes statements about their progress in public reporting rather evidently:

“Industry media has deeply implemented the important instructions of General Secretary Xi Jinping, continuously expanding its presence across all media platforms...The voice of the Party, along with industry initiatives, is being disseminated more widely and deeply through online channels, achieving remarkable results.”

Similar statements are evident in public reporting on CEN and CEPN, where official discourse regarding implementing media convergence strategy emphasises the *upward service* orientation as the primary goal. The earlier study also argued that China’s press leadership often prioritises political compliance over digital growth, with media convergence not being a top consideration either for the firm or for press leaders (Yin and Liu, 2014). In contrast, the current study highlights the perspective of newspaper firms’ members, which underscores the significance of *downward service*. This value misalignment hinders cultural coherence, limits employee motivation to participate, and explains the lack of downward communication regarding strategic visions and plans from press top managers (see Figure 7-7).

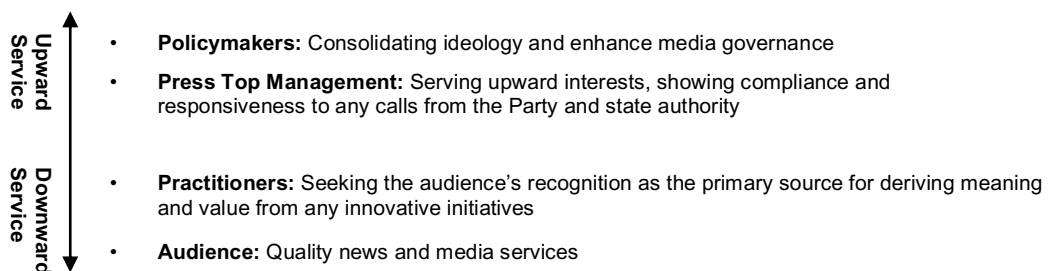


Figure 7-7. Value Misalignment Among Key Actors in Media Convergence Practice (Source: Author's Own Design)

In conclusion, primarily driven by state compliance, Chinese newspaper management lacks sufficient intrinsic motivation to fundamentally transform existing resource structures and develop clear, autonomous strategic plans, instead prioritising formal adherence to policies. Also, practitioners lack a sense of identification with the value of engaging with this state-led media convergence strategy, especially the value delivered to their audiences. It is clear that state ownership provides a supportive institutional basis for mobilising the Chinese press in this state-led initiative, but the controlled motivation behind their actions results in only

superficial reconstruction of tangible and intangible resources, skills, and capabilities. More importantly, the value misalignment among different actioning bodies has become a critical cultural constraint, limiting their motivations to collectively engage in media convergence innovations. Although the resource support from agent owners remains significant in state-compliant innovations, the limited depth of Converging Media Construction is a common issue shared by Chinese newspaper firms. In conclusion, the case of media convergence in China demonstrates the effectiveness of state ownership in mobilising innovation for compliance but highlights its significant limitation in fostering genuine innovation within newspaper firms due to value misalignment and lack of autonomous motive.

7.1.3 Change Averse in Innovation

Beyond state-compliant and self-motivated innovations, this study finds that *change aversion* has become an increasingly notable constraint on Chinese newspaper firms pursuing radical innovation. This section explores the low motivation among Chinese newspaper firms to reconfigure existing resources and develop clear visions for digital transformation. This lack of motivation is reflected in organisational cultures that fear risks and mistakes, prioritise stability, resist change and uncertainty, and view current practices as adequate for daily operations. This section examines critical factors perceived by internal members and external advertisers that shape change aversion cultures. One primary finding is that although state-owned attributes provide resource assurance for Chinese news publishers, the power structure inherent in state ownership, along with the agency-based arrangement, fosters a change-averse culture. This culture favours stability and dependence on established structures, prioritising risk aversion, which significantly constrains Chinese newspaper firms from autonomously strategising innovations within their *entrenched* structures and processes.

Surprisingly, from the practitioners' perspective, the primary challenge for digital innovation within the Chinese newspaper industry is not how to generate significant profits or adopt advanced technologies but rather the limitations in fulfilling its creative functions. When asking what is considered the most urgently needed innovation within newspaper firms, interviewees are most concerned with the creative attributes of newspaper firms and frequently highlight a necessity for fostering creativity at the organisational level:

“We need open cultures allowing members to share their creative capabilities in creating better news content. We need the cohesion to gather people to contribute more actively, with more space to let us express our ideas and suggestions,

involving in news strategy making, for example, across departments” (Interviewee A11, 18 August 2023, Beijing).

“We need constant innovation. If our content lacks novel ideas, our business will die soon. Our client’s expectations are very diversified and changed so quickly nowadays, we must constantly learn and change our mindset, adding novelty to the content” (Interviewee A7, 23 November 2022, Online).

“Originality is so important for us to create video content and develop video-related business. However, originality always calls for creativity. We need more manpower to contribute sufficient novel ideas to strengthen our capability in creative production” (Interviewee A5, 19 November 2022, Online).

“Our news reporting on newspapers becomes stiff and uninteresting, whereas news reporting on digital platforms lacks novelty on topic selection and even often copies already-published contents. We are losing our power in originality, exclusivity, and speciality” (Interviewee A12, 18 August 2023, Beijing).

Although creativity in media management has received limited scholarly attention (Küng, 2008; Malmelin and Nivari-Lindström, 2017; Witschge et al., 2019), this study, aligning with Küng (2023, p.136), demonstrates that constantly maintaining creativity is increasingly vital for media firms in a turbulent environment. These comments from internal members illustrate their collective awareness of the increasing essentiality of creativity for earning recognition from the market and audience in the digital era. Creativity can be understood as the ability to generate *original* and *novel* ideas that are considered *effective* and *helpful* (Boden, 1994; Stein, 1953; Runco and Jaeger, 2012). Interviewees across various positions demonstrate a shared tendency to advocate for creativity-driven innovations within their existing core offerings, such as news production and other media content processes, seeking greater space for creative expression. They believe that fostering the culture of motivating individuals and teamwork to leverage creativity for better content services remains vitally important to maintain organisational competitiveness in the digital transition. However, based on the interviewees’ observation, China’s newspaper management often pays little attention to creativity at the organisational level.

Creativity is often associated with taking risks, especially in terms of challenging existing norms (Tyagi et al., 2017). In other words, fostering creativity requires an environment that permits risk-taking. Interviews suggest that creative output, particularly concerning news content production, is suppressed due to strict control not only by the central authority (as the principal owner) but also by their supervisory entities (as agent owners). From a macro perspective, as noted by Interviewee A10, the media environment in which Chinese newspaper firms are operating nowadays is “unfavourable” for creativity (17 August 2023,

Online), not only due to the increasingly tightened media control (Zhai, 2023) but also the economic slowdown post-COVID (Wu et al., 2023). The fear and sensitivity towards risks and mistakes have been notably growing among interviewed practitioners from three newspaper firms. Interviewee A4 stated, “Everyone is reluctant to take risks—what if we lose our jobs?” (12 November 2022, Online). Some practitioners also noticed a reduced discourse from management in promoting experimentation internally:

“It feels like newspaper firms nowadays don’t emphasise the concept of innovation as much as before” (Interviewee A12, 18 August 2023, Beijing).

Despite the resource support provided by state ownership (see Chapters 3 and 5), increasingly tightened media censorship from the state leaves little room for risk-taking regarding the core offering of news publishers—content goods and services. Interviewee A12 noted, “The room for allowing risks and mistakes has decreased a lot in recent years” (18 August 2023, Beijing), and Interviewee A5 again addressed, “Safety is always extremely important, we must keep sensitive to it” (19 November 2022, Online). Interviewee A10 further stated, “Censorship is becoming much stricter, which results in more pressure and caution to our daily work” (17 August 2023, Online). The perceived tightened censorship and “unfavourable” environment have not only led to more cautious editorial decisions but have also caused media management in Chinese newspaper firms to place greater emphasis on compliance with hierarchical directives while carefully avoiding risks:

“No one wants to be labelled as guilty of ‘state asset losses’ because of any misstep in strategies. This is difficult to bear for individuals” (Interviewee Liu, 6 November 2022, Online).

Alongside the escalating uncertainties in China’s political and economic environment, the decreasing desire for innovation among Chinese newspaper organisations is also deeply rooted in the survival logic of the Chinese press—they predominantly rely on the institutionalised monopoly established by the state ownership to sustain profitability, rather than pursuing optimal resource allocation through market competition. When asked about the so-called newspaper crisis, almost no one in interviews believes their newspaper firms are experiencing a “crisis of survival”. Even advertisers share such a belief that three newspaper firms still hold irreplaceable positions in the energy media marketplace due to their unique position holding credibility and authority as state media brands:

“Access to information to the audience has increased, but credible news outlets for us [advertisers] have not changed. Each industry has limited media resources,

and industry newspapers become our choice of ‘no alternative but to choose’” (Interviewee Liu, 6 November 2022, Online).

In addition to holding a position of scarcity in the marketplace, the fundamental role of the press in China’s political system is also instrumental to their survival establishment. Many interviewees associate their low motivation towards innovation with the *secured* position of the Chinese newspaper firms legitimised by the state ownership:

“In an era where user-generated media is thriving, state ownership can at least secure basic livelihood for many newspaper practitioners...I think the state and the media have a mutual dependency formed from top to bottom—it [the state] needs you [the media], and you need to be dependent on it [for a living]. Due to this stable dependence, they have limited room to manoeuvre, resulting in inertia and a lack of innovation motivation. It’s a mixed bag of pros and cons” (Interviewee A3, 12 November, Online).

Indeed, even if newspapers experience shrinking revenues, as interviewees highlight, the decision to eliminate one paper title primarily depends on the supervisory entity’s need for it:

“Each province or city in China has its local newspaper, such as Shanxi Daily. I believe some local newspapers are certainly not thriving, possibly much worse than industry newspapers. Honestly, in the current bleak financial situation of local governments, you might wonder why they haven’t been phased out by the market. The reason is that the government still needs them. As long as the government needs an organ media, they will not let them die” (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

Certainly, this does not fully assume that the robust guarantee of political necessity ensures the everlasting security of all newspapers in China. There have been several instances of government-controlled newspaper closures in past years. However, such cases only represent a minority phenomenon. The shared belief that three newspaper firms are “irreplaceable” in the current media marketplace implies a collective mindset that substantial changes for digital reform are not considered urgent at this point. A few interviewees also warned that such a shared belief of being “irreplaceable” may be a biased hypothesis in their cognition:

“The exclusivity of the energy industry has led to a narrow-mindedness among industry newspaper practitioners as well. This entrenched mindset limits their openness to new perspectives and growth” (Interviewee A3, 12 November, Online).

“They’ve stayed in their comfort zone for too long. Their view is stuck in the bubble, making it hard for them to think creatively or see the bigger picture. This limits how they approach running their business” (Interviewee Liu, 6 November 2022, Online).

Furthermore, the top-down distribution of power and resources facilitated by concentrated ownership in Chinese press management also contributes to a change-averse culture. This is driven by the fear of higher-ups and an excessive focus on meeting superiors’ expectations, often neglecting the demands of lower levels and audiences. As interviewee Liu highlights,

“Newspaper leaders are not primarily considered businessmen but leaders of the Party at its organisational level and pursuing an ‘official career’(仕途)” (6 November 2022, Online).

It has been discussed that newspaper leadership is primarily decided by the superior bodies, either appointment, promotion, punishment, or removal (Winfield and Peng, 2005; Zhang, 2010). Furthermore, each newspaper firm is also dependent on its owner entities to access both symbolic and material resources, such as intangible authoritative status, news sources, funding, and administrative support. Thus, press management in China often prioritises the superiors’ demands, limiting its openness to creative input and willingness to take risks.

Excessive upward concern leads to neglect of lower-level management. Interviewed practitioners suggest that they hardly obtain clear strategic directions, well-defined plans, and substantial initiatives from the management over the years. This experience has led them to believe not only in the lack of urgent desire for change within the leadership but also undermined their confidence in the newspaper’s transformation. This underscores the notably weak capabilities of Chinese newspaper firms in building transformational leadership (Küng, 2023). One interviewee noted:

“We were given opportunities to voice our opinions to the top manager a few times before, but it seems like they hardly take further reactions. The leader didn’t provide explanations for feedback or any follow-up plans for changes. There’s a lack of willingness to make substantial changes since making changes now, like ‘affecting one part affects the whole.’ If there’s no intention from the top to drive it forward, there’s simply no movement at the lower levels. So, currently, without the desire and demand for innovation from the higher-ups, we don’t have the motivation to pursue innovation as well” (Interviewee A11, 18 August 2023, Beijing).

Similarly, Interviewee A4 complains that press leadership seldom motivates subordinates by communicating clear visions for changes:

“It’s often said that young staff don’t like the boss who often ‘paints a rosy picture’. However, there was even no one drawing these pictures for me. No clear and referenceable plan for us to follow” (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

The continuous disappointment from unfulfilled expectations and the leadership’s lack of enthusiasm for change lead practitioners to adopt a resigned attitude, showing diminished aspirations and an acceptance of the status quo. Drawing on the popularly discussed Chinese buzzword, *lying flat* mindset (Chen and Cao, 2021; Zheng et al., 2023), Interviewee A13 refers to the current low desire and expectations for self-improvement within press cultures to a “lying flat” culture in maintaining their state quo. Such a phenomenon reflects the commonality issue that state ownership brings to the organisational culture of the Chinese press in the current context.

While involved in a similar macro media environment, practitioners’ responses also associate the preference for change aversion with the degree of creative freedom and risk-taking tolerance granted by their agent owners. Specifically, the agent owner, as the direct controlling body of each newspaper firm, may exert varying degrees of control over newspaper operations, especially in terms of editorial policies and organisational strategy, which are often shaped by the institutional priorities and demands of the agent owner, rather than those of the newspaper firm. As interviewee Liu observed,

“Among the three, SGN has the lowest error tolerance since its goal is specifically serving its own mother giant company SGCC, and they receive the strongest level of control with the least marketisation, especially in terms of editorial policies, resulting in the lowest tolerance for risks and lowest autonomy” (Interviewee Liu, 6 November 2022, Online).

As mentioned previously, SGN’s internal member Wang (2022, p.67) similarly stated that the culture at SGN regarding its editorial decisions is more “complex, sensitive, and fragile” compared to general media outlets, and “play it safe” is the top priority (see Section 6.3.2). Additionally, backed by a powerful SOE, SGN benefits from unique resources and experiences much less financial pressure compared to the other two cases. A quote from a leader at SGN, “Corporate newspapers can only rely on self-imposed pressure to innovate” (Wang Haixiao, cited in Pang, 2008), suggests recognition of the lack of external pressure as a limiting factor in motivating change at SGN. Despite minimal external pressure, SGN faces stronger internal pressure. Being closely monitored by SGCC to safeguard SGCC’s public image, SGN faces limited newsroom autonomy but more institutional constraints to fulfil its functioning role as a market entity and a public institution (Li, 2012). As interviewee

A2 observes, corporate-controlled newspapers like SGN often “have little desire for initiating substantial changes” (6 November 2022, Online).

This is not to suggest that SGN is the least innovative since it has demonstrated its stronger capabilities in some self-motivated innovations with more and faster resource renewal. It is important to note that most of SGN’s existing innovative attempts are ultimately serving its agent owner’s interests. Supervised by a non-media SOE, SGN demonstrates strong innovation capabilities only when resource renewal benefits its agent owner SGCC but exhibits weak capabilities in fostering autonomy and innovation for the public good as a news publisher.

In comparison, CEPN is under the direct supervision of NEA, the governmental agency responsible for overseeing and regulating the energy sector in China. As highlighted in Chapter 6, the stringent control and supervision of NEA has given rise to a risk-avoidance culture within CEPN. This is notable in its editorial practices, such as implementing a prioritisation rule of “newspaper-first” to prevent discrepancies between digital and print versions to ensure compliance. Additionally, interviews with CEPN members in previous chapters also suggest that CEPN faces challenges in fostering open-minded, innovative, and adaptive cultures in editorial departments as it must accept NEA’s priority rules. More importantly, even some change initiatives at the organisational level carried out by CEPN are shaped by the expectations of its agent owner. One internal member noted:

“We receive significant attention from the NEA, as we are the only news outlet under its supervision. This attention comes with its perspectives, ideas, and intentions that are likely to bring about certain changes” (Interviewee A6, 21 November 2022, Online).

One example showing the influence of its agent owner in CEPN’s change strategy is the establishment of its media group CEMG, which strategically shifts from a power industry orientation to a broader focus on the entire energy industry orientation. As CEPN’s top leader, Fan Jianying, noted:

“The Party leadership of NEA attaches great importance to our establishment work. The leaders of NEA have conducted multiple research visits, provided guidance, surveyed and deployed in person, and put forward clear and specific requirements. As a media enterprise under the supervision of NEA, it is only natural for us to carry out news and publicity work for the entire energy industry. Only with a rightful name can we speak with authority and become the vanguard and pioneer in news and publicity for the energy industry” (Fan, 2022a).

Additionally, the inspection report on CEPN's operations, published by the NEA (2020), indicates that the NEA requested multiple changes in areas such as internal management, Party construction, and employee management to ensure alignment with its political directives and decisions. This demonstrates that the NEA plays a critical role in shaping CEPN's organisational priorities and strategic decision-making. Similar to SGN, CEPN also possesses limited autonomy at both the newsroom and organisational levels. Although previous sections of this chapter illustrate CEPN's strong capabilities in developing new businesses, such as audio-visual products and non-media offerings, these strategic actions do not conflict with the interests and demands of its agent owner. However, regarding CEPN's core function as a news outlet, NEA's priorities have limited its autonomy in providing value to the public and reduced its desire for substantial change to support digital growth.

In contrast, interviewees believe that CEN appears more flexible and risk-taking compared to the other two:

“It appears to me that people at CEN show more willingness to experiment and explore new things, engaging in research and maintain a certain level of motivation to change” (Interviewee A1, 8 November 2022, Online).

“CEN's content is often considered as better compared to other industry publications. Its flexibility is relatively high in reporting critical news. Other media outlets are more closed off” (Interviewee A4, 12 November 2022, Online).

Chapters 5 and 6 have illustrated the evidence of CEN's higher autonomy and freedom for experimentation compared to the other two firms. Interviewee A1 suggested that the flexibility and openness to change in CEN are attributed to “its relatively young age,” “youth-dominated teams,” and “immature organisational structure” (8 November 2022, Online). However, this study notes that one more crucial factor is that CEN experiences much less interference from its agent owner. This is not only because the owner, PD, as a press group, enables CEN with an independent stance from the energy industry but also because both PD and CEN share similar interests and goals as news outlets. Although PD provides less resource support for CEN for the aforementioned innovative initiatives, it grants CEN greater autonomy and respects journalistic professionalism rather than using it to pursue its demands and interests. As the advertiser interviewee observed:

“Although for all Chinese press, political correctness is of utmost importance. However, for PD, as long as actions do not contradict major principles and premises, and even with minor flaws, the tolerance level is relatively high. In

other words, PD allows a higher tolerance level to CEN. Both CEPN and SGN are slightly weaker than CEN in this aspect” (Interviewee Liu, 6 November 2022, Online).

This comparison demonstrates how interest misalignment between newspaper firms and their agent owners affects their innovation capabilities, particularly their organisational autonomy and motivation to initiate changes in entrenched processes and routines. Although all three Chinese newspaper firms show weak capabilities in reconfiguring their existing processes and routines, CEN exhibits relatively greater autonomy and a higher tolerance for error than the other two, with much less emphasis on serving its agent owner’s interests. However, autonomy alone has not enabled CEN to demonstrate a strong advantage in innovation capabilities due to resource constraints in renewing resources for digital capabilities. These complex interconnections indicate that innovation capabilities of Chinese newspaper firms require the coordination of various elements to develop. Key elements, such as *autonomy*, *resource capacity*, and *management priorities*, emerge as particularly influential, all closely linked to the structural foundations of media ownership.

7.2 Summative Analysis and Conclusions

Through a motivation-based analytical framework, this chapter reveals that self-drive, state compliance and change aversion collectively shape the primary motivations influencing the innovative behaviours of Chinese newspaper firms. Commonalities in self-driven innovations across the three firms are consistent with previous studies (Lowrey, 2011; Villi et al., 2020): Chinese newspaper firms primarily prefer incremental innovations to resource renewal rather than radical innovations. Moreover, all three firms exhibit a strong autonomous drive to diversify their business models into the video and film industry and value-added information services, with strong internal support and positive recognition from their members. This can be attributed not only to the operational independence of many newly added businesses from core teams but also to the widespread recognition that these self-driven innovations in business models positively contribute to the organisation’s reputation and profitability. In contrast, change initiatives within core departments, such as newsrooms, face strong resistance and confusion due to inconsistent and unclear strategic communication.

Although cultural constraints are commonly seen in newsroom transformations (e.g., Boczkowski, 2005; Karimi & Walter, 2015; Groves & Brown, 2020), this study finds several inconsistent findings to previous research. For instance, studies based in the Western context

often highlight a fear-driven motivation of newspaper firms' reaction to digital disruptions to avoid missing out or lagging (Boczkowski, 2004; Nguyen, 2008; Paulussen, 2016). However, in China, newsroom transformation presents a shared motive of state compliance, which carries significant symbolic importance in aligning with state-led policies. This study highlights the strong sensitivity of Chinese newspaper firms to policy and regulation, while their responsiveness to market dynamics is more limited compared to their Western counterparts, which operate in a relatively open and competitive media marketplace. As a result, this study argues that the survival logic of Chinese newspapers primarily relies on institutionalised monopoly or oligopoly rather than active market competition, leading to a weak sense of urgency or concern about falling behind emerging digital media.

Furthermore, Chinese press management is more concerned with the risks and potential troubles that change initiatives may bring about, causing conflicts with agent owners' and the top authority's expectations. Although incumbent organisations commonly favour stability and predictability (Nguyen, 2008) due to established assets and routines (Teece, 2007), Chinese newspapers' preference for stability is also driven by compliance, with "safety" as a top concern. They worry more about failing to meet superior expectations than about market competition. This trend is evident in Converging Media Construction and the development of change-averse cultures. Although state ownership offers Chinese newspaper firms a stable resource base and strong support for state-aligned innovation, the combination of limited autonomous motivation and heavy reliance on top-down resource distribution results in management prioritising higher authorities' expectations over audience needs. This contrasts with practitioners' desire for market and audience recognition, creating a misalignment that dampens practitioners' motivation. Internal members perceive their firms' top management as more focused on symbolic compliance than on actual process improvement, increasingly fostering a "lying flat" mindset characterised by low expectations and a passive attitude toward change.

Previous studies on news media innovations demonstrate more concentrated ownership, which often leads to stronger innovative capabilities, compared to diffusely held or independent ownership (Adams, 2008; Francis and Smith, 1995; Hill and Snell, 1988; Krumsvik, 2009; Krumsvik et al., 2013b). In this regard, this research finds that state ownership in China, which is highly concentrated, presents distinct advantages for Chinese newspaper firms to quickly respond to state-led initiatives, acquire resources, and enjoy a secure policy environment to develop capabilities for digital growth. However, sustaining this advantage requires sufficient autonomous motivation, too. The example of China's

current media convergence practice highlights the importance of balancing motivations and aligning the expectations of key actioning bodies when designing state-led innovative policies and strategies. In other words, media innovations, whether state-led or self-driven, require sufficient autonomous motivation for genuine engagement; otherwise, the resource advantages associated with state ownership will be difficult to fully leverage, potentially undermining resource efficiency and policy effectiveness.

Agent owners hold a particularly influential role here; this study finds that their impact on Chinese newspaper firms' innovation capabilities tends to be positive when initiatives align with their institutional priorities and demands. However, when misalignment occurs, agent owners may restrict newspaper firms' autonomy in decision-making and risk-taking, thereby constraining their motivations to innovate and change. This finding suggests that media ownership plays a crucial role in shaping media firms' capabilities for external adaptation, alongside other studied elements such as industry dynamics, managerial cognition and sensing skills, firm history, organisational structure, internal mindset, and strategic choice (Ellonen et al., 2009; Jantunen et al., 2012; Oliver, 2018). Specifically, this study further highlights the interplay between two major aspects through which agent owners influence the innovation capabilities of Chinese newspaper firms for the digital growth: *resource capacity* and *organisational autonomy*.

Resource capacity is one determinant of the first-order capabilities of newspaper organisations, primarily engaging with tangible resources (Karimi and Walter, 2015). Additionally, Oliver (2018) highlights a range of tangible and intangible resources, skills, and capabilities that may contribute to media firms' capabilities to efficiently respond to external dynamics. The current study further highlights those intangible resources, such as *the brand value* and *authoritativeness* of the newspaper in China as determined by its agent owner's hierarchical rank, which also critically contributes to its capabilities in resource renewal. One example can be CEN and CEPN entering the public opinion monitoring market by leveraging their brand value as the authority media. Furthermore, resource backing and mobilisation capacity from the agent owner are crucial for Chinese newspaper firms in developing new capabilities for innovation. However, this support depends on the agent owner's willingness to mobilise resources, which is influenced by its interests and demands.

Another factor, organisational autonomy, refers to the degree of independence that the newspaper firm possesses regarding decision-making from its agent owner. This study finds that the autonomy of Chinese newspaper firms is also crucial for developing innovation

capabilities, especially in terms of boosting motivations and organisational creativity for either public or commercial value (Küng, 2023). Despite the same state control, the extent of autonomy in Chinese newspaper firms can vary based on the degree to which the agent owner's primary interests are independent of the newspaper's reporting field and the alignment of institutional goals between the newspaper firm and its agent owner. Thus, agent owners may further weaken the organisational autonomy of the Chinese press alongside state control by limiting access to space and resources for creative input and risk-taking unless the goals of these initiatives align with the interests of the agent owners. This again underscores the necessity for further scholarly and regulatory attention in China to distinguish between different agent owners based on their primary interests, as well as to examine the boundaries of specific control over newspaper autonomy when building innovation capabilities for both public and commercial values.

Finally, this chapter concludes that despite multiple strengths empowered by state ownership, there are multiple ways that China's delegated media ownership acts as a source of cultural constraints in Chinese newspaper firms' digital transition. First, the monopolistic resource barriers and insufficient market competition sustained by state ownership secure Chinese newspaper firms a stable position but result in limited crisis awareness and a low desire for change. More importantly, the top-down allocation of resources and controlling power legitimised by centralised state ownership determines that press management often prioritises the demands and expectations of the upper-level authorities. Although market dynamics and audience demand are crucial, they are not the top priority, weakening the emergency of pursuing digital growth. Additionally, the delegated approach has empowered the agent owners' power to exercise their control over newspaper firms based on their interests and demands, further diminishing the autonomy and self-governance of Chinese newspaper firms. Limited autonomy in decision-making and strong supervision at the organisational level significantly suppress autonomous motivations, creative input and risk-taking, fostering "lying-flat" cultures and low expectations for change. Lastly, the most pressing issue observed in this study is that the extent of conflicting interests, demands, and expectations between agent owners and newspaper firms can generate cultural constraints that hinder value consistency and collective cohesion in pursuing digital adaptation. These findings have significant implications for media governance and policymaking in China, which will be further discussed in the following chapter.

8 Conclusion

This concluding chapter first summarises the key findings for the three research questions of this study and how these findings link and contribute to the knowledge of state ownership, media policy and newspaper innovation in China today. Additionally, this chapter outlines the managerial and policy implications of the study, discusses the expected and unexpected challenges encountered during the research process along with its limitations, and concludes with recommendations for future research.

8.1 Summary of Key Findings

8.1.1 RQ1: What are the shared and differentiated organisational culture phenomena among Chinese newspaper organisations?

This China-based research selects three industry newspaper firms in Beijing to explore their shared and distinct organisational cultures. Three newspaper firms, CEN, CEPN and SGN, are all national news publishers targeting the energy industry audience. By analysing a large number of public documents and 16 interviews, Chapter 5 first identifies three primary cultural commonalities shared by three firms:

The first cultural commonality is their shared identification with “State Media” (国字头媒体). Narratives in public profiles and interview discourse both demonstrate that three Chinese newspaper firms consistently prioritise disseminating authoritative information *on behalf of the state* as their primary role of state media outlets. Different from the West, which regards journalistic independence as a critical standard for evaluating the credibility of a news outlet (Lauk and Harro-Loi, 2017; Sjøvaag, 2013), this study reveals that in China, both newspaper practitioners and external advertisers commonly assume a media outlet’s credibility and influence are primarily determined by whether it is a state media outlet and, subsequently, its authoritative rank in the political hierarchy. Many interviewed internal members are proud of being identified as “State Media”. Even advertiser interviewees in the energy industry consistently prioritise state-owned media outlets as their primary partners in branding and communication over private-owned media outlets, such as online platforms, regarding authoritative quality and influence. This mutual feedback reinforces newspaper practitioners’ belief in the “irreplaceable” position of state newspapers in the converging media marketplace, and they do not perceive the rise of digital platforms as posing any existential threat to their presence.

The second cultural commonality is the tendency towards symbolic compliance, seen in the homogeneous adoption of the state-led media convergence strategy. Analysis of public documents on China's media convergence policy evolution indicates that Chinese top leadership has led the discourse construction, with regulatory bodies gradually establishing standardised requirements and mechanisms for promoting policy implementation. Correspondingly, three newspaper firms exhibit synchrony in adopting Converging Media Construction, such as the Central Kitchen Model and Converging Media Matrix. Despite positive external reporting on their progress, interviews reveal practitioners' scepticism regarding their firms' genuine convergence with digital capabilities, indicating a superficial stage of integration. While the current study did not find the "no acceptance" attitude among newspaper practitioners, which is mentioned in former studies (Xiong and Zhang, 2018; Yin and Liu, 2014), concerns persist regarding an overemphasis on symbolic significance over practical actions. A sense of confusion and uncertainty was commonly expressed by interviewees since they perceived little evidence of restructuring the newspaper-oriented value system from managerial actions.

The third cultural commonality is the commercial culture of "co-creation" embraced by both industry advertisers and journalists. Many of the newspaper practitioners interviewed acknowledge that their over-reliance on industry entities for news sourcing, advertising, and circulation revenues has reinforced commercial interference, thereby eroding journalistic ethics and the health of the industry press in an invisible manner. Of even greater concern is the growing normalisation of collaboration between journalists and advertisers in industry news reporting. Advertiser interviewees disclose that they are buying more "tailored news stories," i.e., advertorial articles, to carry a certain extent of newsworthiness rather than directly promoting their names or products. Such a well-disguised strategy adopted by advertisers and reporters has blurred the boundaries between advertising and news in appearance, making it difficult for readers to discern. This trend echoes the shifting role of journalists in commercial activities seen in Europe-based studies (Cornia et al., 2020; Ferrer-Conill et al., 2021), indicating the growth of this ethically problematic phenomenon across international contexts. This study further argues that the prevalence of *informal relationships* (Barbalet, 2023) between advertisers and newspaper firms in China is fostering greater acceptance of commercial influence in journalistic practices, making the tactic of "co-creating news" a norm and further eroding the journalistic function of these firms.

Several aspects of these cultural commonalities align with findings from previous empirical studies on China-based and Western newspaper firms undergoing digital transitions, such as

the erosion of journalistic culture and the weakening of autonomy (Sparks et al., 2016; Wang and Sparks, 2019a; Witschge and Nygren, 2009) or cultural tensions in the newsroom's digital adaptation (Gade, 2004; Garrison, 2000; Xiong and Zhang, 2018). However, one cultural characteristic of the three Chinese industry newspaper firms, which has not yet been seen in earlier China-based studies on newspaper digital adaptation (Wang and Sparks, 2019a; Xiong and Zhang, 2018; Yin and Liu, 2014), is the similar way in which newspaper members and advertisers interpret the political, economic, and cultural significance of the label "state media" in today's media marketplace. That said, such a shared sense of contentment associated with the "state media" label may be limited to Chinese national newspaper firms. None of the interviewees in this study reported experiencing significant cost cuts or staff reductions in recent years, although such issues have been observed in many local press groups in China (Wang and Sparks, 2019a; Xiong and Zhang, 2018; Yin and Liu, 2014).

In addition to cultural commonalities, this study also summarises the most significant cultural differences of each newspaper firm as follows:

CEN: a Self-Reliant Culture

CEN's organisational culture exhibits a relatively high degree of flexibility and autonomy. It is undeniable that press autonomy in China is subject to the restrictions imposed by the strict censorship mechanism. The case of CEN, compared to the other two, illustrates differentiated autonomy in media outlets within the unity of China's press system. CEN-associated public documents (e.g., founding leadership interviews and profile narratives) and existing interviews with practitioners all demonstrate that CEN enjoys a relatively lenient culture of autonomy and self-reliance. The culture is mainly attributed to multiple factors:

Fundamentally, compared to CEPN and SGN, CEN's superior authority, PD, is a press conglomerate unrelated to the energy industry, which provides CEN with greater journalistic independence and a better alignment of interests between PD and CEN. However, due to PD's limited intervention, CEN receives less tangible support, leading to a more self-reliant approach to its development. Furthermore, CEN's founding leadership established a strong belief in the significance of journalistic autonomy and professionalism, which was reflected in both editorial policies and organisational slogans. This culture was further strengthened by subsequent leadership, which actively supported investigative journalism and public opinion supervision (Zhao and Wusan, 2009). It is also important to note that internal

members play a crucial role in preserving this culture by collectively resisting any attempts to disrupt it.

With its digital growth, unlike the other two firms, CEN exhibits a dissociated culture between its digital and print teams. Due to less censorship from superior bodies and limited tangible support or oversight from top management, CEN's digital team enjoys greater autonomy in both topic selection and self-experimentation. Based on interviews and document analysis, CEN's digital team adopts a traffic-oriented approach, prioritising algorithmic compatibility and popular tastes in guiding their daily tasks. This strategy has successfully resulted in a large following for CEN across multiple platforms. Nevertheless, this has created friction between the print and digital teams. Interviewed print team members are relatively unsupportive of the digital team's traffic-oriented approach and believe that newsworthiness should remain the top priority. As a result, CEN faces a cultural divide between the digital and print teams in its digital adaptation. However, this cultural clash had not received managerial attention at the time the research was conducted.

CEPN: an Industry-Bound Culture

Comparatively, CEPN, which has grown alongside the power industry of China, demonstrates an intimate connection with this sector. Interviews suggest that CEPN has cultivated a loyal readership and stable partnership with key actors within the industry, widely recognised as “the son of the power industry.” However, strong ties with the industry interest groups, entrenched value in serving the propaganda needs of the industry actors, and deep-seated emotional ties to the power sector all have led the newspaper to often prioritise propaganda over journalistic value: the idiom mentioned by its interviewed member, “report good news but not bad news”, evidently demonstrates such an unspoken assumption within its organisational culture. Furthermore, CEPN's industry-bound culture is not only a result of strong ties with the electric power industry actors but also shaped by its supervisor, the NEA, the regulatory body for China's energy sector. This has further limited CEPN's editorial independence and organisational autonomy, leading to its dual role as an industry newspaper and a mouthpiece of the NEA. Consequently, the way CEPN practices its role in public opinion supervision has devolved into a propaganda instrument, serving both the NEA in disseminating its governance narratives and industry actors in reporting “good news.”

Different from CEN's approach, CEPN adopts a more conservative strategy in managing its news reporting between the digital and the print. Although internal members have recognised

the vital need for differentiating strategies for digital reporting in interviews, they are required to remain strictly unified with newspaper standards to ensure news events are reported uniformly across multiple platforms, primarily justified based on avoiding mistakes and risks. Internal members observed that their supervisory entity, the NEA, operates under the assumption that print media is more reliable for safe reporting, which results in the continued prioritisation of print tasks over digital ones. As concluded by interviewees from CEPN, newsworthiness, speed, and creativity are not the primary concerns of its supervisory entity; instead, everything is centred on “playing it safe” to avoid risks and mistakes. Consequently, CEPN’s approach to digital adaptation in its news-related tasks prioritises “safe reporting” over catering to the evolving demands of digital news. This contrasts sharply with the cultural dynamics exhibited by CEN in the digital era.

SGN: a Servient Culture

The third case, SGN, exhibits a servient-oriented culture that primarily represents the interests of its superior entity, SGCC, a key interest group in the energy industry. Industry newspapers like SGN, often categorised as corporate newspapers, are a unique phenomenon shaped by China’s distinct context and are rarely seen in other countries. Like other typical press outlets in China, SGN holds an official press license, allowing it to publish five issues per week nationally. It also maintains a large team of certified journalists, “pursues on-the-spot interviews” (He, 2015), and follows the “three reviews and three proofs” process (SGN, 2020). However, this study finds that SGN’s cultural values are highly rooted in the organisational culture of SGCC. Rather than adopting a genuine news media stance, SGN predominantly reflects a corporate agenda. Unlike CEN and CEPN, SGN has no motive to create “conflict” and “instability”; rather, it focuses more on helping maintain SGCC’s reputation. Furthermore, under the influence of SGCC’s tightly controlled culture, SGN exhibits strong risk aversion due to the potential consequences of mistakes or perceived disruptions. Therefore, this study argues that SGN possesses the weakest journalistic attributes, with its core values primarily oriented towards serving SGCC’s interests.

However, SGN is good at leveraging its resource scale and the top-down administrative directives from its superior, SGCC, to establish robust revenue channels and dissemination mechanisms. This strategic alignment enables SGN to achieve the highest circulation volume among the three newspaper firms, positioning it under the least financial pressure. Despite its limited autonomy, SGN has maintained a strong resource capacity for digital growth. For instance, it has built a nationwide network of correspondents and implemented

a converging media system at each branch, ensuring a steady flow of sources and content for multi-platform delivery. Thus, the case of SGN demonstrates that relying on a non-market-based approach can still enable strong economic performance in China. However, it cannot be neglected that the strong subordinate culture of SGN, shaped by the SGCC framework, has largely undermined its journalistic function as a newspaper organisation.

In conclusion, each Chinese newspaper firm exhibits distinct cultural traits reflected in its editorial stances and organisational priorities. At the same time, they share certain cultural commonalities shaped by the broader political and economic systems in China. Both the cultural similarities and differences underscore the critical role of structural contexts, particularly media ownership, as a key factor in explaining the underlying mechanisms behind these cultural phenomena.

8.1.2 RQ2: How does media ownership play a role in the above-identified shared and differentiated organisational cultures?

One key finding of this study is that the core role of state ownership in shaping organisational cultures lies in legitimising the authority of both the principal owner and its delegated controlling body (the agent owner), whose layered influence underpins the cultural commonalities and differences among Chinese newspaper firms. While all Chinese newspapers share the same nominal owner, namely the state (on behalf of the whole people of China), interviews and public documents reveal that the practical roles of “owner” and “investor” are exercised by their direct supervisory bodies. Drawing on Agency Theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976), this study conceptualises China’s state media ownership as comprising two components: *the principal owner*, responsible for overarching state ownership of assets, and *the agent owner*, the de facto sponsor and supervisory body of individual newspaper firms. Within this framework, the principal owner shapes several cultural commonalities, whereas the agent owner has a greater impact on cultural differences between newspaper firms. This is because the agent owner often directly influences the day-to-day operations, priorities, and decisions of the newspaper firms, often driven by its own institutional goals and interests, which vary between different supervisory bodies.

As a critical institutional basis for China’s media governance, state ownership in China underscores how state ownership legitimises the Party-state’s control over media organisations, shaping their shared, strong identification around serving the Party-state. Three Chinese newspaper firms in this study, through fulfilling state obligations, develop a sense of belonging and uphold the legitimacy of Party and state leadership, which in turn

sustains the effectiveness of media control. Furthermore, state ownership provides institutional advantages through policy support, resource allocation, and enhanced credibility, which collectively shape the underlying assumptions of Chinese newspaper firms regarding their entitlement to such privileges and reinforce their belief in their “irreplaceable” positions. Apart from these institutional arrangements, the enduring influence of Confucian culture in China (Heisey, 2000; Yan, 2006; Zhang, 2007b) has reinforced a hierarchical mindset, leading advertisers and newspaper practitioners to prioritise political status and ownership identity, even in the digital age.

Regarding the common symbolic compliance and homogeneous behaviours in media convergence, this study posits that such behaviours are a cultural outcome of China’s top-down institutionalisation of the state-led media convergence policy. State ownership has shaped the obligations of newspapers to adhere to the authority’s demands and accept the oversight of their superiors. With this legislative foundation and regulatory framework, the three newspaper firms display similar imitative strategies and narratives in responding to the state’s standards and requests in media convergence policies. However, interviews confirm that newspaper-centric values remain unshaken, with some interviewees attributing this entrenched culture not to media ownership but to its historical success and ongoing effectiveness in sustaining profitability. Building on the evidence presented in Chapter 7, this study argues from a motivational perspective that the cultural commonality of symbolic compliance in media convergence practices arises from two key factors: a primary desire to comply with official directives to avoid punishment and limited intrinsic motivation to make substantial changes to existing processes. These motivation-based factors remain closely linked to the structural influences of state ownership.

The third cultural commonality—the acceptance of informal relationships in commercial operations and even journalistic practices with external advertisers—is seen by the interviewed media practitioners not as a direct consequence of state ownership but rather as a result of newspaper firms’ heavy reliance on advertising revenue and weak self-regulation. Regardless of ownership types, advertisers’ influence over manipulating news reporting is, to some extent, inevitable (Herman and Chomsky, 2010). However, interviews with advertisers suggest that excessive dependence between advertisers and newspapers is also influenced by the high concentration of power legitimised by state ownership. Specifically, the unified state-owned press system has resulted in a dominant position of state-owned newspapers in the media marketplace, limiting options for advertisers and reinforcing mutual reliance. Thus, the practice of “co-creating news reports” between advertisers and newspaper

firms reflects a commercial consequence of the strong dependence between advertisers and media outlets, resulting from the monopolistic environment shaped by state ownership coupled with insufficient regulatory oversight.

When it comes to the cultural differences among the three firms, this study highlights that the main differences lie in the varying degrees of autonomy and the differing priority rules at the organisational level, which are often directly shaped by the demands and expectations of their agent owners. The first major manifestation is the influence of agent owners on the level of organisational autonomy held by the newspaper firm. The case studies on CEPN and SGN, for example, both demonstrate the agent owner's vested interests in the industry have largely limited its editorial independence and organisational autonomy in fulfilling its journalistic function. Another notable cultural difference is their different assumptions concerning "organisational safety". Interviews highlight that agent owners often play a role in defining the boundaries between what is considered "safe" or "risky" for the newspaper firms, with these boundaries largely shaped by the concerns and priorities of the agent owners. In the case of CEPN, its agent owner, the NEA, often prioritises "safety" and favours print media, leading to editorial policies that emphasise "playing it safe" and maintaining a newspaper-centred approach to mitigate risks in their daily operations.

These findings suggest that the core role of state ownership lies in creating an institutional foundation that legitimises the power of control exercised by both the state and agent owners over Chinese newspaper firms. However, China's delegated approach to state ownership inevitably leads to agency loss (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), resulting from the misalignment of institutional interests within the extended principal-agent chain. More specifically, the excessive use of legitimate ownership rights by agent owners to serve their interests, as observed in this study, not only significantly weakens the journalistic function of Chinese newspaper firms but also limits their motivation to reform existing, well-established processes. This issue is worth considering, as it highlights the impact of agency issues on China's media governance efficacy.

8.1.3 RQ3: To what extent does media ownership act as a source of cultural constraint over attempts to innovate among Chinese newspaper firms?

Using a motivation-based analytical framework grounded in Deci and Ryan's (2012) Self-Determination Theory, Chapter 7 reveals that self-drive, state compliance and change aversion collectively shape the key motivational dispositions of Chinese newspaper firms,

significantly influencing the cultures and behaviours in digital adaptation. Regarding self-driven innovation, all three firms exhibit a strong internal motivation to diversify into the audiovisual media sector and offer value-added information services. These efforts are supported by substantial internal backing and positive recognition from their employees. The limited cultural barriers to these changes observed by this study can be attributed to both the recognition that these innovations enhance the firms' reputation and profitability and the fact that they mainly involve supplementary business ventures that do not disrupt core operations.

Drawing on the key actions involved in developing organisational capabilities for external adaptation (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2023), Chapter 7 illustrates that driven by autonomous motivation, CEN, CEPN, and SGN actively sense, seize, and develop new skills and capabilities in these newly added business areas. However, from a comparative perspective, CEPN and SGN exhibit faster and more robust capabilities in renewing resources and structures for audiovisual services compared to CEN. Interviewees commonly attribute this difference to the varying resource capacity provided by their agent owners. Additionally, the three newspapers display different approaches to diversification: both CEN and CEPN are more active in expanding into non-media businesses, while SGN keeps its focus on the media business, as it faces less financial pressure than the other two.

Considering state-compliant innovation, this study uses the state-led media convergence practice as an example to argue that symbolic compliance and homogeneous behaviours among Chinese newspaper firms stem from controlled motivations to meet official expectations and avoid punishment in policy implementation. More importantly, the lack of genuine motivation for engaging with this policy highlights a cultural constraint: the misalignment of values, demands, and expectations between policymakers, agent owners, media management, and media practitioners. For the nominal owner, China's top leadership expects the strategy to strengthen ideology and public opinion for solid governance. However, media convergence is not a priority for Chinese press management or agent owners, where political safety and compliance take precedence, driven by an ingrained upward service orientation (Yin and Liu, 2014). In contrast, practitioners emphasise that the value of media innovation should lie in gaining audience recognition. This focus on the audience contrasts with the top-level emphasis on serving higher authorities. As a result, press leadership pays little attention to clearly communicating media convergence goals and plans internally, leading to confusion and ambiguity. Thus, while state ownership effectively mobilises innovations for compliance, it limits genuine engagement in state-led media convergence.

This study further highlights the third motivational disposition—change aversion—which has become an increasingly significant constraint on Chinese newspaper firms pursuing radical innovation. Compared to incumbent organisations in a free market (Nguyen, 2008; Teece, 2007), Chinese newspaper management defines risks politically, focusing on meeting higher authorities' expectations, with resource allocation and rewards controlled by upper management, and, given increasing political control, must act cautiously to avoid punishment and protect their “official career” (Yin and Liu, 2014). Additionally, state-owned newspaper firms rely on institutional monopolies to sustain their position and profitability, leaving them without sufficient pressure or urgency to change. Consequently, interviewees noted low enthusiasm among press leadership for change, with limited opportunities to experiment with new ideas. This has fostered a growing “lying flat” culture, reflecting practitioners' lowered expectations for innovation and acceptance of the status quo.

From a comparative perspective, all three firms exhibit weak capabilities in reconfiguring their existing processes and entrenched framework, primarily due to a lack of motivation for change. Among them, CEN demonstrates relatively greater autonomy and a higher tolerance for error compared to CEPN and SGN. However, autonomy alone has not provided CEN with a significant advantage in innovation capabilities, as it faces notable resource constraints in advancing its digital capabilities. These findings suggest that the development of innovation capabilities in Chinese newspaper firms depends on the *coordination* of multiple factors. Key elements, such as organisational autonomy and resource capacity, are particularly influential and are closely tied to the structural foundations of media ownership. The comparison across the three cases highlights the conditional nature of the agent owner's positive impact: their resource advantages only enhance the innovation capabilities of China's newspaper firms when their interests align with those of the firms. This study highlights the critical role of agent owners in *refracting* the effects of state ownership on the culture and behaviour of Chinese newspaper firms.

This empirical study demonstrates that media ownership acts as a structural source of significant cultural constraints on the innovation capabilities of Chinese newspaper firms in digital adaptation. The *strength* of this constraint, as highlighted by this study, is influenced by the alignment of interests and priorities between agent owners and the firms, as agent owners' priorities can either enhance or limit the autonomy and resource capacity of newspaper firms to innovate. It is also notable that there are the structural benefits of state ownership observed by this study, such as access to resources, stability, strong mobilisation

ability, and institutional supports, which offer a solid foundation for China's newspaper firms to buffer and adapt, although these benefits may not always lead to the most efficient outcomes for innovation. This finding suggests that media ownership can be a valuable addition to the theoretical discussions on structural forces shaping organisational capabilities for external adaptation, such as dynamic capabilities (Jantunen et al., 2012; Murschetz et al., 2020; Oliver, 2016; 2018). Considering the efficacy of media governance, this finding underscores the need for regulatory attention to curb the excessive interference of agent owners in newspaper operations, their misuse of subsidiary presses, and the resulting negative impact on media innovation, which affects both economic and public interests.

8.2 Major Research Contribution

Regarding its theoretical contribution, this thesis makes a distinctive advancement by integrating perspectives from multiple disciplines beyond traditional media management studies. It introduces two innovative analytical frameworks that significantly deepen our understanding of media ownership and media innovation, particularly within the context of a state-controlled media landscape such as China.

Firstly, this research draws on Agency Theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976) to dissect the two key entities responsible for exercising ownership duties and rights within China's newspaper ownership structure, introducing the concept of "agent owners" into the discourse on media ownership in China. This innovative perspective sheds light on the pivotal yet often overlooked role of agent owners, offering a more nuanced understanding of the control mechanisms within China's media ownership system. By expanding the oversimplified view of China's media ownership, this study challenges the conventional focus on the state as the sole authority or on supervisory units (primarily represented by local governments) and instead highlights the significant role of agent owners in shaping decision-making priorities and cultural dynamics within Chinese newspaper firms in a distinct way.

This analytical framework highlights the diverse impacts resulting from differences among agent owners, with data collected from case studies providing substantial empirical evidence and identifying persistent misconceptions about the uniformity of China's state-owned system. More importantly, media ownership is considered a sensitive topic in the Chinese academic sphere, resulting in relatively limited and superficial discussion in Chinese-language papers. Therefore, the introduction of this concept fills a research gap in the field and makes a significant contribution to a deeper understanding of China's media ownership.

Secondly, this research adopts Deci and Ryan's (2012) Self-Determination Theory to propose a motivation-based analytical framework for investigating organisational behaviours within Chinese newspaper firms in the digital transition. Although this theory traditionally applies to the interplay between individual developmental tendencies and the external environment (Olafsen and Deci, 2020), this research demonstrates that its central concepts (autonomous and controlled motivations) can also effectively contribute to comprehending behavioural motives and their link to cultural conflicts within the chosen cases. This research suggests potential applicability to expand the Self-Determination Theory from the individual to the organisational level in media management studies. More importantly, the motivation-based analytical framework developed by this study, including self-drive, state compliance, and aversion to change, also brings about a new lens to explain cultural constraints in building adaptive capabilities in media management studies.

Furthermore, this study contributes to existing research on the structural forces shaping media firms' capabilities to adapt and innovate by highlighting the critical role of media ownership, particularly through a case study of state ownership. It demonstrates that the influence of media owners on newspaper firms' adaptive capabilities stems from the strategic capacity of media owners, particularly in terms of resource control and the support for autonomy. The focus on the agent owner's role in refracting the impact of state ownership further deepens the understanding of how the innovation capabilities of state-owned news media firms can be both constrained and empowered by structural factors such as ownership arrangements. This provides a new lens through which to examine media innovation, offering a valuable addition to the literature.

This thesis also makes a significant empirical contribution through in-depth case studies of three Chinese newspaper firms, offering valuable qualitative data that enhances the understanding of China's unique media landscape, especially the often-overlooked group of industry newspapers. Conducting interviews on such a relatively sensitive topic was particularly challenging in China, making these data even more valuable. Additionally, interviews with advertisers provide a rare perspective, shedding light on the viewpoint of external clients, an angle underexplored in previous research. Drawing on interviews and public documents, this study uncovers the cultural tensions within China's delegated state ownership system, highlighting concerns about the insufficiently regulated boundaries of agent owners' controlling power and the resulting agency loss, with significant implications for media governance. This research not only deepens our understanding of China's media

system but also enables meaningful comparisons with media organisations outside of China, making a substantial contribution to cross-cultural media policy and management research.

8.3 Managerial and Policy Implications

Firstly, interviews with internal members highlight a critical need for transformational leadership (Bass and Riggio, 2006; Küng, 2023) in Chinese newspaper firms. The findings reveal that Chinese newspaper management often overemphasises upper-level priorities, neglecting to communicate clear visions or provide feedback to internal members on change initiatives. Some respondents even questioned whether leaders genuinely intended to pursue media convergence, leading to widespread ambiguity and fostering a passive “lying flat” mindset among staff. Given the hierarchical structure of the Chinese media system, leadership is the most likely role to act as an internal agent of change, motivating others to follow. However, this study observes that bureaucratic leadership (Mansaray, 2019) often dominates Chinese managerial style. The need for boosting intrinsic motivation, clarifying strategic goals, ensuring consistency between discourses and actions, and promoting inter-departmental collaboration commonly expressed by interviewees calls for more managerial attention to transformational leadership skills to foster innovation (Oke et al., 2009) and manage change (Kotter, 2012). Additionally, Chinese policymakers may consider integrating leadership skills (Northouse, 2021) into the media convergence strategy to enhance policy impact.

Chinese media management should pay more attention to the cultural constraints stemming from both broad structural factors and gaps in internal cognisance. In addition to clarified strategic plans and visions for staff to follow, involving members within the communication process is also vitally important (Kotter, 2012), which helps develop knowledge-based capabilities, skills and resources (Oliver, 2018) for building stronger adaptive capabilities. It is also essential for the leaders to learn and respect the established culture within the firm before initiating changes; the case of the CEN leader’s failure to implement new principles for news reporting illustrates how ignoring existing cultures can lead to counterproductive outcomes. Additionally, press management in China can also draw suggestions from Schein (2010) motivating members to adopt new methods through genuine actions, demonstrating the tangible or intangible value of adopting new methods rather than relying solely on mere verbal emphasis. However, based on the current findings, unless the issue of low autonomous motivation is addressed, leadership will likely struggle to take substantive action.

Given the perceived high uncertainties in monetising traffic through dependent digital platforms like *Douyin* and *WeChat*, Chinese newspaper firms face challenges in generating substantial revenues from digital sources. While this study illustrates their exploration of revenue streams beyond advertising, interviewees advocate for the paywall model as a sustainable approach to revenue generation, emphasising the importance of high-quality content services for audiences. However, the application of paywalls in China is rare due to concerns about the public nature of news (Cheng, 2023; Sun, 2023). There should be more experimentation with this model within the Chinese newspaper industry. Furthermore, these firms need to focus more on leveraging opportunities through a better understanding of audience needs for resource renewal for innovations.

This study also reveals potential regulatory gaps that are vitally important to the health of China's newspaper industry, including journalism. Evidence from interviews suggests that agent owners have not been adequately regulated in their over-exercise of authority, resulting in the additional weakening of the *public* attribute of Chinese newspaper firms. The agent owners may utilise the subordinate newspaper as their propaganda machine to pursue their interests, rendering the papers unable to fulfil their function in public opinion supervision. Consequently, public interests are undermined, information flows in the industry and society are obstructed (Shi, 2014), and communication failures (Pan, 2012) occur. Given this, it is crucial to consider the institutional interests of delegated agents and thoroughly assess the implications of value misalignment between agent owners and newspaper firms on media governance. Policymakers should also strengthen existing regulations to clearly define the boundaries of agent owners' power, as this significantly affects the organisational autonomy of Chinese newspaper firms.

The growing entanglement between journalists and advertisers has additionally led to a grey area that has been ethically problematic to journalistic professionalism, undermining the objectivity and transparency of information to the audience as well as the policymakers. Although Chinese advertising law and the recent regulatory methods for Internet advertising management published in 2023 all clarify that sponsored content must be identifiable to the audience as an advertisement, it remains extremely challenging for regulatory bodies to consistently monitor the vast volume of content being produced. This calls for increased regulation of the health of the press. This study also suggests utilising other regulatory bodies that have not yet been identified and established. The necessity for self-regulation should be emphasised here since there is not yet any self-regulating entity existing in China's newspaper industry (Wang, 2010). At this point, self-regulation practices (e.g., press

councils) in Western countries can be a reference to consider (Cohen-Almagor, 2015; Fengler et al., 2015; Miracle and Nevett, 1988). In addition, China's authorities could consider establishing accessible channels, such as online forums and platforms, for public feedback, which would help enhance media self-discipline through public oversight.

Lastly, this study also underscores the critical need for a more cohesive and effective media convergence policy design in China. A key challenge identified is the misalignment of values and expectations across the various stakeholders involved, including policymakers, press leadership, and media practitioners, leading to significant fragmentation in the strategy implementation. Therefore, policymakers may need to review the policy design and pay attention to a certain level of value alignment to motivate both media management and practitioners for genuine engagement.

8.4 Research Challenges and Limitations

The most significant challenge faced by this research was the difficulty in collecting data. When data collection began in 2022, China was still under strict COVID-19 policies, making face-to-face interviews unfeasible. Moreover, during the pandemic, there was exceptionally strict censorship and media control in China. Many potential informants were hesitant to participate, fearing the risks associated with discussing ownership and state-related issues. Among the three cases, interviewing internal members at SGN proved to be the most challenging. Despite attempts to contact several potential interviewees who had previously worked there, most declined to comment on SGN-related matters. Similar difficulties were encountered in recruiting participants from CEN and CEPN. Additionally, during the follow-up interview stage, only a few participants were willing to engage. Within this context, the non-disclosure of operational information by newspapers added further complexity to the data collection process.

Difficulties in data collection have led to unexpected challenges in balancing the data. Ideally, this study would have aimed to conduct an equal number of interviews across three newspaper firms and different job positions at each newspaper firm. However, the number of interviews targeting the case of SGN is less compared to that of CEN and CEPN. Due to difficulties in recruiting participants, priority was given to achieving sufficient interview numbers rather than ensuring representation across different positions. The unequal distribution of interviews may lead to a representation bias, affecting the overall balance and comprehensiveness of the study findings (Bowen, 2009). To mitigate this impact,

interviewees are chosen to be experienced in the industry media sector, with many of them also being familiar with SGN. They also provided valuable data about SGN, serving as references. Additionally, public documents serve as effective supplementary data that enable triangulation of the findings from interviews.

This study also contains limitations due to the potential bias of documents and interviewee discourse. The research finds that many documents collected for this study contain promotional content. In addition, interviewees may also have limited or biased perceptions on certain topics. For instance, one interviewee suggests their collective “irreplaceable” confidence is a biased cognition. Keeping this in mind, the researcher prioritises the empirical data collected by interviews and utilising documents as triangulation to compare “what they do” with interviews with “what they say” in these public documents. Despite the imperfections in the data, the interviews and documents collected for this study were nonetheless relatively rich and provided a great deal of primary data.

The final limitation is the generalisation concerns. Although this study presents empirical value in introducing rarely mentioned groups of industry newspapers to the field of Chinese media transition, case studies on China’s context and non-mainstream entities may limit the generalisability of findings. The commonly assumed “irreplaceable” position among practitioners may not be applied to that held by those from metropolitan newspapers. However, the author believes that conducting in-depth qualitative research on a less explored group of entities still has more benefits than drawbacks, as it enriches the diversity of empirical cases within the Chinese press. Furthermore, although newspaper firms in China are facing a varied segmented media marketplace, the underlying logic of media ownership arrangement is generalisable across the country. However, this suggests the need for further validation work in future research.

8.5 Suggestions for Future Research

This study presents multiple promising directions for future research. More China-based studies are needed to assess agency loss within the delegated media ownership model, particularly by examining the boundaries of agent owners’ power, which is a critical concern for both scholars and policymakers. Such research could also include a critical analysis of existing media regulations and ownership policies to identify gaps that allow excessive intervention by agent owners in subordinate news outlets or the increasing involvement of journalists in commercial operations. Furthermore, drawing on Oliver’s (2019) insights,

future research could explore the divestment strategies adopted by Chinese newspaper firms as a key component of digital adaptation—a dimension not addressed in this study but holding significant potential to enhance understanding of agent owners' impact on media firm strategies in China.

Following the discussion on agent owners' influence, media plurality, a key focus in studies on media concentration and ownership in Western contexts, is another area that this research does not address in depth. Given the findings on the significant role of both the state and agent owners in shaping editorial policies and media stances, future research could explore how different agent owners influence the diversity of voices, opinions, and analyses in the content of subordinate newspapers. Quantitative methods would be particularly valuable for examining the impacts of state ownership on media plurality in China, offering a richer understanding of this critical issue.

Additionally, aligning with Küng's (2023) call for research on the origins and organisational impact of creativity in media firms, this study highlights the need to further explore the drivers of organisational creativity within Chinese news institutions, especially in the context of media convergence. Based on suggestions from the interviews about the increasing need to foster creativity in newspaper firms to adapt to the evolving and converging nature of their offerings, this study stresses the need for more China-based empirical research on this issue. Such research could deepen our understanding of creativity in Chinese media organisations and help develop practical toolkits that enable media managers to enhance organisational creativity by nurturing skills, expertise, and motivational foundations (Küng, 2023, pp.140–142).

Lastly, this study encourages the application of the analytical frameworks proposed here to future research on Chinese media ownership and management from various perspectives to further validate their relevance and impact. Both the agency-based ownership framework and the motivation-based framework offer valuable tools for scholars, policymakers, and media managers to analyse structural constraints and identify capability gaps (Karimi and Walter, 2015; Lavie, 2006) within Chinese media firms. However, to fully generalise the findings, additional empirical studies are needed, ideally incorporating a broader range of industry contexts or comparative analysis across different countries. Overall, this research lays the groundwork for deeper explorations of media ownership and innovation in China and beyond, offering potential contributions to the field.

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Appendix 1 Interviewee List

No.	Interview Date	Interviewee Name	Years of Experience	Occupation	Location
1	6 Nov 2022	Liu	More than 10 years	Advertiser	Online
2	8 Nov 2022	Anonymous Participant 1 (A1)	More than 10 years	Advertiser	Online
3	6 Nov 2022	Anonymous Participant 2 (A2)	More than 10 years	Advertiser	Online
4	12 Nov 2022	Anonymous Participant 3 (A3)	5 – 10 years	New Media Editor	Online
5	12 Nov 2022	Anonymous Participant 4 (A4)	5 – 10 years	Journalist	Online
6	19 Nov 2022	Judy (Pseudonym)	5 – 10 years	Administrative Professional	Online
7	19 Nov 2022	Anonymous Participant 5 (A5)	5 – 10 years	New Media Journalist	Online
8	21 Nov 2022	Anonymous Participant 6 (A6)	More than 10 years	Commercial Manager	Online
9	23 Nov 2022	Anonymous Participant 7 (A7)	More than 10 years	Commercial Manager	Online
10	21 Dec 2022	Anonymous Participant 8 (A8)	More than 10 years	Commercial Manager	Online
11	15 Nov 2022	Anonymous Participant 9 (A9)	More than 10 years	Journalist and Editor	Online
12	17 Aug 2023	Anonymous Participant 10 (A10)	More than 10 years	Editor	Online
13	18 Aug 2023	Anonymous Participant 11 (A11)	5-10 years	Journalist	Beijing
14	18 Aug 2023	Anonymous Participant 12 (A12)	5-10 years	Journalist and Editor	Beijing
15	18 Aug 2023	Anonymous Participant 13 (A13)	5-10 years	New Media Editor	Online
16	19 Sept 2023	Anonymous Participant 14 (A14)	More than 10 years	Editor in Chief	Online

Appendix 2 Participant Information Statement

Research Title: Ownership and cultural constraints: the pain point of digital innovation in Chinese newspaper organisations

Researcher: Wei Zhao

Supervisors: Prof. Gillian Doyle and Prof. Raymond Boyle

Course: PhD in Media and Cultural Policy

Why have I been chosen?

You are being invited to take part in a research project about the constraints of Chinese newspaper organisations in the digital transition. You are being asked to take part because you are/were one practitioner in this industry, and you have witnessed the process of digital innovation of Chinese newspaper firms.

Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information on this page carefully. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What will happen if you take part?

The purpose of this study is to conduct a cultural analysis of Chinese newspaper organisations to understand the current constraints they are experiencing in digital innovation and to explore how media ownership may play its role in shaping these constraints. If you decide to take part, I will ask you some questions about cultural phenomenon and recent innovation strategies or activities carried out by the newspaper organisation you are/were working for. You do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to.

This will take about one hour. I will record your answers on a voice recorder so that afterwards I can listen carefully to what you said. I will be finished gathering information by 1st December 2022. After the interview, I may also contact with you to request further information to ensure the correctness of the interview data.

Do I have to take part?

You do not have to take part in this study. If you decide not to, you will be free to leave. If, after you have started to take part, you change your mind, just let me know and I will not use any information you have given me.

Keeping information safe and private

I will keep the information from the interview in a locked file on my personal computer. If you want to be interviewed anonymously, I will not reveal any information about your name, age, gender, and specific position when reporting the findings of this research. Furthermore, your name will be identified as one unique code (e.g., A1). If you like keeping the ownership of your thoughts and comments, you could keep your real name or choose another name to use when I am writing about what you said. No one else will know which name you have chosen. I will destroy all recordings when the project is finished. I will keep the notes without your name in and the agreement form so we can prove we asked you whether you wanted to take part and that you agreed.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

When I have gathered all of the information from everyone who is taking part, I will write about what I have learned in a PhD thesis for my doctoral study. This will be read and marked by teachers at the university. And the research findings may be used for future study and academic publication.

How can I access information relating to me or complain if I think information has been misused/ used for purposes other than I agreed to?

You can contact the researcher or their supervisor if you have concerns. If you are not comfortable doing this or if you have tried but don't get a response or if the person in question appears to have left the University, you can contact the College of Arts Ethics Officer (email: arts-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk).

Where there appear to have been problems, you can – and indeed may be advised to – submit an '[access request](#)' or an objection to the use of data via the University's Data Protection and Freedom of Information office. Anyone submitting a request will need to provide proof of their identity. This is not intended to deter inquiries, but rather reflects the University's duty to guard against fraudulent approaches that might result in data breaches. You also have the right to lodge a complaint against the University regarding data protection issues with the [Information Commissioner's Office](#).

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed and agreed by the College of Arts Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow.

If you have any questions about this study, you can ask:

- me, Wei Zhao (w.zhao.1@research.gla.ac.uk)
- my supervisors, Prof. Gillian Doyle (Gillian.Doyle@glasgow.ac.uk) and
Prof. Raymond Boyle (Raymond.Boyle@glasgow.ac.uk)
- Ethics officer for the College of Arts (arts-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk)

Thank you for reading this!

Appendix 3 Consent Form

CONSENT TO THE USE OF DATA

I understand that Wei Zhao (name of researcher) is collecting data in the form of recorded interviews for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow. The aim of this research project is to explore the organisational culture of Chinese newspaper firms and understand the link between organisational culture and digital innovation of China's newspapers.

I consent to participate in the interviews on the terms below:

- I can leave any question unanswered.
- The interview can be stopped at any point.

I agree to the processing of data for this project on the terms below:

1. Use and storage of research data in the University of Glasgow reflects the institution's educational/ research mission and its legal responsibilities in relation to both information security and scrutiny of researcher conduct.
 - a. As part of this, under UK legislation (UK General Data Protection Regulation [UK GDPR]), I understand and accept that the 'lawful basis' for the processing of personal data is that the project constitutes 'a task in the public interest', and that any processing of special category data is 'necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research'.
 - b. I understand that I have the right to **access** data relating to me or that I have provided and to **object** where I have reason to believe it has been misused or used for purposes other than those stated.
 - c. Project materials in both physical and electronic form will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage (locked physical storage; appropriately encrypted, password-protected devices and University user accounts) at all times.
2. Interviews will be transcribed, and the recordings deleted when the project is completed and/ or by 30th September 2026 at the latest.

3. NAMED PARTICIPATION:

- a. If I choose to take part as a named participant, all names and other material likely to identify other individuals will be redacted/ removed.
- b. I may withdraw from the project at any time up until its completion date without being obliged to give a reason. In that event all record of my remarks of will be destroyed immediately.

4. PSEUDONYM USE

- a. I can choose to be referred to by a pseudonym of my choosing. All names and material likely to identify other individuals will be redacted/ removed.

- b. I may withdraw from the project at any time up until its completion date without being obliged to give a reason. In that event all record of my remarks of will be destroyed immediately.

5. ANONYMOUS PARTICIPATION:

- a. If I choose to take part as an anonymous participant, my name and all identifying information will be redacted/ removed. All other names and other material likely to identify individuals will be redacted/ removed. This process will be completed by 30 December 2022. After this, the data will be deemed to have been anonymised.
 - b. I understand that once the data collected is anonymised, in accordance with UK legislation (General Data Protection Regulation [UK GDPR]), it may be used for the purposes of the project without further reference back to me. However, I understand that I may request access or raise an objection if I have legitimate grounds for concern that I remain directly identifiable from it or that it has been used for purposes other than those stated.
6. Redacted project materials will be retained in secure storage by the University for ten years for archival purposes (longer if the material is consulted during that time). Consent forms will also be retained for the purposes of record.
7. The data may be used in future research and be cited and discussed in future publications, both print and online.

ALL PARTICIPANTS:

- ☐ I consent to take part in the interviews.
- ☐ I agree to the terms for processing of data outlined above.
- ☐ I confirm I have been given information on how to exercise my rights of access and objection.

TICK AS APPROPRIATE:

- ☐ I agree to take part in the above study on the condition I remain anonymous.

OR

- ☐ I agree to take part in the above study on the condition my name is replaced with a pseudonym of my choosing.

OR

- ☐ I agree to take part in the above study and wish to be cited by name. I understand that I will be allowed to see and approve use of my comments in pre-publication drafts of any outputs.

Name of Participant: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature: _____

Researcher's name and email:	Wei Zhao (w.zhao.1@research.gla.ac.uk)
Course organiser's name and email:	Prof. Gillian Doyle (Gillian.Doyle@glasgow.ac.uk) Prof. Raymond Boyle (Raymond.Boyle@glasgow.ac.uk)
Department address:	Centre for Cultural Policy Research 13 The Square University of Glasgow Glasgow, G12 8QQ United Kingdom