

Why Community Newspapers are Burgeoning in China

And What We Can Learn from That Explosive Growth

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Abstract

Community newspapers in China are experiencing unprecedented growth. A category of media outlet that practically didn't even exist 10 years ago in China, community papers are springing up from Guangzhou to Chongqing and from Hefei to Shanghai in a growth pattern that can only be called meteoric.

I have been privileged to be both observer and catalyst in this media landscape transformation, spending the last three summers touring this immense nation, teaching, researching and learning at J-Schools, industry workshops and newsroom classes (where a *free press* is always the 600-lb. gorilla in the room)!

Though it's difficult to nail down hard numbers, my Chinese colleagues and I have catalogued dozens of start-ups that didn't exist five years ago. One such success story is *The Golden Edition* of Deng Feng, pop. 100,000, in Henan Province. I had the privilege of teaching at that paper last summer just as they were launching the free, all-local, 30,000-circulation weekly. It was an immediate success, and the happy publisher tells me they cleared one million Chinese Yuan in their first year (\$160,000 U.S.) and they expect to double that profit margin in 2014-'15.

Prior to *The Golden Edition*, citizens of Deng Feng had no access to local news, says my lead Chinese colleague, Associate Professor Chen Kai of the Communication University of China in Beijing. "It's a big market," she insists. "There are about 2,000 comparable small towns in China without any newspaper..." – and all just ripe for a lucrative start-up.

To be sure, all this change is happening in a state-controlled media system, which makes the phenomenon all the more amazing. To the best of our understanding, Beijing's press minders think that community newspapers will contribute to the long sought-after Chinese goal of "the harmonious society."

But make no mistake about it— the profit motive is also a key factor too. Blame it on Warren Buffett, whose very name carries immense clout in China. His recent U.S. community newspaper acquisitions have caused quite a stir in The Middle Kingdom.

Last summer I hosted an investment team from Beijing sent to my state to interview Berkshire Hathaway editors and publishers from newly acquired Media General papers about the transition (read: how much money are they making?). Our sense is that the Chinese investment team was impressed and that a favorable report back to Beijing is resulting in more government support for new local start-ups.

So why should American community newspaper editors and publishers care about what happens 9k miles away in China? For starters, because one-fifth of the world's population lives there. And as the saying goes: When China sneezes, the world catches a cold. The growth of Chinese community papers could be a bellwether for the future here.

And also, because these successful start-ups are "ink-on-paper," if the Chinese can find the silver bullet business plan — how to really make money with dual-platform (digital-and-print) community newspapers — then they will have solved the riddle that plagues the American newspaper industry.

Introduction: a letter to a fellow China scholar

Dear Steve,

My dearest pal and cherished colleague, was it not just yesterday back in '67 when we toiled happily together at the Daily Tar Heel at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill — a mere blink of the eye ago?

Forgive the absence of communication, my old comrade-in-arms, and don't mistake my silence for lack of caring, or of thoughts of you. You appear to be whipping the Big C, and nothing could make me happier. I trust your health continues to repair under the care of your docs and most excellent wife.

You have been much in my thoughts of late, and the reason is right here on my left forearm: a large reddish-purple bruise from an encounter with a truculent riding mower. No worries; just a token of its esteem. The wound will heal, but its message persists.

The bruise is the shape of the map of China, where, within a day's span, I will return to teach our craft.

That Community Journalism is burgeoning in China — where the practice and profession we love so much — is seen as something new and exciting is thrilling to this old ink-dabbler.

In the world's largest country, in the world's top economy, in one of the world's worst polluters — there is much work to be done.

According to my research, most cities do have boilerplate party newspapers. But they are not truly local. Nor are they respected, trusted or believed. So I am told.

The concept of local reporting — much less Charles Kuralt's "Relentlessly Local" community journalism — is a novel concept to this land of 1.3 billion souls, making one out of every five earthlings Chinese.

Sorta' gets your attention, doesn't it.

So...how cometh a former small-town newspaper publisher finds his way to the Middle Kingdom? (If, 20 years ago, when I began writing the first edition of "Community Journalism: Relentlessly Local," you'd told the book would lead me to Beijing, Shanghai and Chongqing, I'd have said you were barmy!)

I lay the blame for this journalistic adventure squarely on the diminutive shoulders of one Chen Kai, associate professor at Beijing's Communication University of China.

Though small of stature, she is now a "big potato," as I like to tease her. For it was she who, back in the '90s, happened upon a copy of my book in her college library. Fascinated by the contents, she quickly realized how important community journalism could be in helping to bring about China's long-sought after "harmonious society."

Long story short: Prof Chen (who goes by "Karen" ...yes, I realize how amazing that is — your dear wife's name exactly...) studied with me at UNC '09-'10, resulting in her

groundbreaking book, "Introduction of U.S. Community Newspapers: Small is Beautiful," 2011. That in turn led me to a Fulbright to Beijing summer 2011 for my first teaching junket. A follow-up trip last summer linked me with the third leg of our collegial stool: Associate Professor Ren Li of Southwest University of Political Science and Law in Chongqing. I spent a happy two weeks there last summer with his journalism students, and another two weeks touring the country teaching "CJ" in Hefei and Zhengzhou and Shanghai.

Thus united by our common passion for local reporting, we three scholars have formed something of an international community journalism consortium. We presented our preliminary findings last summer to the national convention of AEJMC (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication) in Washington, D.C.

And here's our headline: CJ is blossoming in China — improbable as it sounds under a state-run media system. I think local officials are beginning to appreciate how community newspapers can contribute to a community's livability and sense of well-being.

I've distilled it down to this: *That great community media help build, nurture and sustain great community.*

Equally boggling, (at least to me) my book has been revised and translated into Chinese and rolls off the presses in Guangzhou later this month. Whodda' thunk it?

So I'll be there for the book release, but also to work again with Prof. Li in Chongqing, as well as several other community newspaper publishers down south near Hong Kong.

Dear old pal, are we not on parallel career tracks? I'm thinking about your community journalism teaching in Jordan, Moldova and Rumania. You've been there, done that, and have 15 T-shirts. How amazing that we two old newsroom rats should find our way around the wide world to teach the journalism we love. I'll keep you posted.

— Mr. Joke (I was introduced thus at my first Beijing lecture and...well, if the shoe fits...). So be it.

Onward and upward

Day one: On the street with Beijing's *Desheng Today*

In search of the elusive community in China...I am led to Desheng Street in old Beijing, and home of an experimental community newspaper, *Desheng Today*, a 20k circulation, eight-page tabloid weekly produced by three women reporters working for the local government.

Ah, you say — a government rag!

Yes, but in China, even small steps can be giant ones. A local government wanting local coverage is the rare exception, and an enlightened local leader seeking to communicate directly with the governed is downright visionary — so my host, Professor Chen Kai, tells me.

She explains further: Beijing (affectionately known as BJ) is broken down into districts and then into bite-sized municipal units called "streets" (which is totally confusing to Westerners since in China such a "street" means something else, including about 150,000 souls or about 30,000 households).

Desheng Street is such a place, located in a shade-lined older and quieter section of this sprawling megalopolis, far from the newer high-rise towers seen leaping into the smog-choked air beyond the Sixth Ring Road.

In a smoky-smelling government building where smoking is forbidden, Desheng *Today's* 12 X 12 office is home to three young women reporters. But they don't spend much time there, 26-year-old reporter Liu Shu Xia (Summer) tells us.

"We get out and walk around to find out the stories and talk to the residents," explains the reporter, camera around her neck.

This boots-on-the-ground approach appears to be working. Launched four years ago, Desheng *Today* is beloved by its readers – especially by the seniors of Desheng, for whom *Today* has become a staple of community life, and its reporters like family.

Sixty-five-year old retiree Mrs. Liu Shu Xia has saved every single edition of *Today*, from Vol. 1 No. 1, back in 2010.

"I cannot live without the newspaper!" she tells us excitedly, sitting on the edge of her bed in her Spartan but spotless apartment that smells sweetly of incense.

"They report on the average person's life," she says, "It's so close to our lives."

Indeed. Summer, in her two years on "the street," has forged many such one-on-one relationships with "her residents" — so much so that when residents see news happening, or even if they think a simple feature story should be in the paper — they call Summer, go down to the newspaper office, or have a cup of tea with the reporter to discuss the idea.

I am impressed. Mrs. Liu can't stop talking about "her paper."

When the new edition of *Today* arrives in her mailbox each Monday, she says she "can't wait to read it," and often just stands right there reading...and often the neighbors come out to join her, talking about what's in the paper this week.

Before the paper started, she tells us, "We didn't know what the street-level government was doing." Now, if there's a change in the leadership, if a new flea market is started, or if there's a neighborhood volunteer clean-up day scheduled, it's in the paper, she says.

Mrs. Liu herself has been the subject of several features, and she says such attention makes her feel happy and good about herself and the neighborhood — and by extension, good about her local government.

Pointing to a front-page photograph of a group of schoolchildren carrying signs and wearing protective breathing masks, she explains: when her grandson took his holiday gift money to buy 1,000 masks to donate to his classmates and teachers to protest the air pollution, Mrs. Liu thought the event worthy of the paper, and phoned Summer, who she calls "her reporter."

Before the *Desheng Today*, such a story and photo would never have made the major metro paper, much less the front page, Prof. Chen tells me.

But it's not just the hyper-local stories that *Today* covers. Reporters also want to know what readers are thinking about the big national and international stories. So after the Malaysian Flight 370 disaster, reporters hit "the street" to find out local reactions. And although no one they spoke with actually had lost anyone in the flight or knew anyone who did, the reporters said they encountered an outpouring of compassionate and prayerful responses — published the next week on a full-page spread.

Additionally, Mrs. Liu says she appreciates how *Today's* reporters take interest in community activities she cares about: her dance troupe, her church events, the calligraphy club meeting.

"What the big papers report is so far away from our life," she concludes.

Mrs. Liu isn't the only fan of *Today* I get to hear from on this visit.

Sixty-six year old artist Mr. Qi considers *Today* reporter Summer "like my own daughter."

A big, stoop-shouldered man with an expressive, long Boris Karloff face and deep resonating baritone voice, the retired government worker tells us proudly, "I know all about the lives of those journalists," (meaning that they are three single young women). "The whole neighborhood is trying to find nice boys for them!" he says with a grin.

Summer blushes with pleasure as Mr. Qi looks on affectionately. He too has been a subject of her stories — with his regulation-sized pool table dominating the little apartment, converted today into his artists studio on top of the green felt.

When Mr. Qi and his calligraphy club recently began making dumplings for the shut-in elderly, Summer found out and did a story. The word quickly spread, and the next thing, the poetry club wanted to join in — and then the community chorus, and then the whole dumpling affair simply mushroomed.

Sounds like community-building to me.

I realized some time ago that we couldn't just "cut and paste" American community journalism onto the Chinese media landscape — that whatever model of community journalism that China chooses to create, it must be and will be wholly Chinese-style.

Well, maybe this is one model. Even though such a government/media cross-pollination strikes your average U.S. journalist as heresy, here in China, Prof Chen tells me, this could be one way forward. We have to take our small victories where we can find them.

Why hasn't this been tried elsewhere I wonder? Maybe other cities don't know about it, the professor replies. Besides, she adds, it takes a special kind of leader to invite such media attention.

When asked if *Desheng Street Today* readers could ever complain in the paper about local government, or had there ever been a controversy between the paper and the local government, Prof Chen sighs and says thoughtfully, "That's a question that is too big..." and taking a deep breath, she adds, ending the subject with a piercing look : "I've always told you, democracy is a luxury."

On the way home, the pollution lifts, and for the first time, we can see the western mountains in the distance, shimmering like a vision.

Mr. Joke meets Mr. Zhao

Print is alive and well here. The major daily newspaper here, the 330,000-circulation Chongqing Morning News, just bought a state-of-the-art German printing press and launched three new community newspapers this year.

Vanishing? In a pig's eye.

Mr. Zhao, the paper's silver-haired and steely-eyed leader, begins a morning staff meeting to explore ways the papers can improve. One of their challenges, he explains: how to help foster a sense of community — what the Chinese call "the harmonious society." — in this sprawling industrial city of over 30 million. What's my advice? Mr. Zhao asks. I tell them, you need civic engagement — and to create that, the papers must convince so-called ordinary citizens of their individual civic importance.

When I am finished, the room gets very quiet, punctuated only by the incessant honking of traffic outside the open screenless windows.

Q: When is a community not a community?

A: When it is gated.

I'm sorry; I don't wish to offend anyone. But to my way of thinking, the two words "Gated" and "Community" don't belong together. Reckon I'm just an old purist on that score.

So it's no surprise that my review of two of the Chongqing Morning News' start-ups wasn't so glowing: they're in partnership with very large, upscale gated communities.

Of course, there is nothing critical or controversial in the papers. Is this not a conflict of interest, I ask my host? Not in China, I am told. When I make a judgmental comment about the sanctity of our journalistic moral code, I am sternly (but playfully) rebuked by Prof. Chen, "You are such an ARROGANT AMERICAN!"

Teachable Moment # 47.

At day's end, when I was about spent, I am taken to the third start-up, where my faith is restored.

Launched just last week by the Chongqing Morning News, the Nan-an (Southbank) News serves an honest-to-gosh neighborhood that feels distinctly like "community" in the American sense of the word.

At a community center brimming with locals engaged in all manner of leisure and physical activity including dancing, aerobics, card games, mah-jongg, calligraphy and painting...there was even one room full of neighborhood folks sitting around reading the new Vol. 1 No. 1 edition of the Nan-an News and discussing its contents – sort of like a book club, except it was their newspaper!

OK. Look, the skeptical journalist in me naturally suspected a set-up. But if this happy flurry of activity had been staged just for my benefit, how come the community centers at the two gated communities had been totally devoid of residents – and eerily so?

Being a glass-half-full kind of guy (In Chinglish they call me "Mr. Half-Full Cup"), I'm going to give these folks the benefit of the doubt. This was authentic.

At day's end, the enthusiastic young staff of the new community newspaper huddled to seek advice, how better to do their job and serve their community. You'd have to have had anti-freeze in your veins to not be touched. I left Nan-an cheered, with my faith restored and my hopes for the future of Chinese community journalism buoyed.

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A stranger in a strange land

At varying times, I find China fascinating, confounding, delightful, infuriating and at times downright frightening...a place that historian Lucian Pye calls, not a country but "a civilization in search of statehood."

China, the American political scientist Pye famously wrote, is "a civilization pretending to be a nation-state."

That is so well put, and helps the student of China grasp at least a small shred of

understanding.

For a Westerner, and particularly an American, I don't think there's ever a full understanding of China. You'd have to live here, boots on the ground, for years, to even begin to appreciate the nuances of such a complex society.

All I can do is profess the scholar's ancient caveat: 'All I Know Is That I Know Nothing' and then attempt to part the heavy red curtain the slightest bit.

What I get to see is a mere sliver of the vast cultural, historical, political landscape that lies hidden beyond.

Incomprehensible. It is too much, too vast, too old, too complex, too impenetrable. But alluring and irresistible at the same time.

My little peephole on China is like an image in a primitive Camera Obscura. Upside down and backwards, faint, with no distinct edges. An out-of-focus facsimile.

I look to old China hands, both former U.S. Secretaries of State, Madeleine Albright and Henry Kissinger, for guidance.

Albright opines, "China is in its own category...too big to ignore, too repressive to embrace, difficult to influence, and very, very proud."

And from Henry Kissinger, who made over 50 trips to China and spent a lifetime studying the Middle Kingdom: "The U.S. and China need each other...because they are too large to be dominated, too special to be transformed and too necessary to each other to afford isolation. Beyond that, are common purposes attainable? And to what end? "

Outside my window, the street sweeper truck approaches, playing a tune like an American ice cream truck cruising neighborhoods for kids and their dimes. As it passes my window, the truck's soprano electronic organ bleeps a sing-song children's tune I recognize:

"It's a small world after all...
It's a small world after all.
It's a small world after all,
It's a small, small world."

An old-fashioned newspaper war in Chongqing

Chongqing, with its five competing big metro daily newspapers, reminds me of New York City in the 1920s.

Five big papers duking it out for every reader, for every advertiser. It's an old-fashioned newspaper war. You'd think a city of 30 million people could support that many papers, but I'm told ad revenues last year fell precipitously.

Enter community journalism. Two of the major metro papers have launched smaller neighborhood community newspaper ventures this year. It's a bold move, and from the surface they look promising.

But frankly, senior management downtown at the big papers views these new start-ups primarily as a new potential revenue stream, and not so much as a tool for civic engagement or improving life — or even a way to do better and more effective local journalism. It's about the almighty dollar, or in this case, the yuan. Which, as a former community newspaper publisher, I can respect.

But if their only drive is the profit motive, they will not succeed, at least in the opinion of this ink-dabbler.

The irony, to me at least, is that the local government leaders, with whom the papers are partnering (and getting some financial support from) DO see these start-ups as community-building initiatives, and valued for their contributions to that elusive and long-sought after Chinese goal: "the harmonious society."

And I believe the boots-on-the-ground newspaper staffers understand the greater social significance of so-called "hyper-local" reporting (a term of which I am not fond, but will use in this case to better make my point.)

This morning I am taken to a "ju wei hui," the smallest municipal unit, even smaller than a "street." Here, in a stiflingly hot small newsroom packed with a dozen journalists, I meet the staff of the Da-shi-hua News" that serves a *neighborhood* of 168,000 souls. (That's three-quarters the size of Durham!) Their publication is a 20,000-circulation, free, eight-page tabloid twice-weekly. And the content is all-local.

Launched just this past January, the Da Shi Hue News is, in part, a counter-punch by the Chongqing Evening News in response to the three community newspaper start-ups of their bitter cross-town rival, the Chongqing Morning News, who beat them to the punch last summer.

Sweat-drenched but happy to be among fellow journalists, I am led into a big conference room to meet the local governmental leaders and chat with the paper's staff.

On the wall a projector shows a slide welcoming "Professor JOCC."

First I hear from Jin Li, the neighborhood leader, a kind-eyed raven-haired man of my age, I'd guess, who runs the meeting with magisterial calm and a constant contented smile on his handsome face. I consider Mr. Jin to be an enlightened progressive politician; he has read Prof Chen Kai's book on community journalism, and is clearly up to speed on the philosophical underpinnings.

"We want to keep our people informed," he tells me, "about what their local government is doing and what we plan to do." And he adds, "We want to give the local residents a new life. And we are not worried about the finances (of the paper)."

When I asked about pre-publication restraint or censorship, Mr. Jin smiled serenely, thought for a moment and then said, while he did have the right of prior restraint, so far he hasn't exercised that option. So far so good, he tells me. He trusts the editors and the staff not to blindside him.

Remember, I have to remind myself again, "this is China." Back in the U.S., such a partnership would be considered "strange bedfellows" indeed!

So, what do the paper's editors think about the partnership and the venture?

Editor Ding tells me that Mr. Jin "is an open-minded leader," and that "the aim of the paper is to enhance the sense of union" in the neighborhood.

Deputy Chief Editor Fan Tian Ling says, "It's a bridge between the people and the government, and we use it to solve problems."

Like what? I ask, ever the reporter.

"We have a page for complaints," I am told. Readers can send in anonymous gripes, which a reporter then tracks down and verifies, and if it passes the smell test, the paper runs the kvetch, sans signature.

Turns out people in Chongqing complain about potholes and lousy landlords, just like folks in Chapel Hill. And, not surprisingly, such public grouching in the paper gets things fixed, so I am told.

Editor Ling leans across the table and tells me proudly, "This newspaper is more than just a newspaper."

Well, score one for the home team.

Now, if they can just sell enough advertising to keep the big boys downtown off their backs.

Perhaps we are "only fools" ...

When I finish lecturing to young Chinese journalism college students, they are full of questions. Heartbreaking questions.

How can we write the stories we want to write without being fired?

How much money does your government give the newspapers?

How can we establish a sense of community when we live in these tall apartment towers where we don't even know our neighbors?

And how about what a recent journalism major graduate told me darkly: "Only fool in China becomes a journalist."

There is much work to be done, here.

But as my oldest, (and in the popular text vernacular, BFF) buddy Steve Knowlton, distinguished professor at Dublin City University of Ireland, wrote me recently about

journalism in China, “How do you do good journalism if you don’t have a free press?” The answer, of course, is, eventually, community journalism.” So there are those of us who are veterans of this trade — not wide-eyed, wet-behind-the-ears young idealists — but old “rode hard and put up wet” veterans who still believe, after all these years, that good journalism in a free world matters. That actually, in view of the glut of trash journalism online and on cable radio and TV, good journalism matters now more than ever. That’s my rant, and I’m stickin’ to it.

So you can imagine how much fun we had during our exchange in that journalism class in Chongqing the other day, deep in the heart of China.

In which Editor Li gets it right

Of all the encounters I have been privileged to experience in China, my very favorite has been with Editor Li — my “brother from another mother” in the city of Foshan in the southern province of Guangdong.

“Older Brother Joke,” he calls me.

We met last year at a community journalism conference in the city of Hefei, and the connection was instant and mutual. A tall lanky man of constant motion, salt-and-pepper black hair and a set of merry eyes — Li is fiercely enthusiastic about local newspapering, won’t take no for an answer, and is a man after my own heart.

His English is halting; my Chinese is non-existent. Yet we communicate. I feel like Kevin Costner in “Dances with Wolves,” struggling to communicate with his new Lakota Indian friends, Kicking Bird or Wind in His Hair — we get very close, lock eyes, wave our hands and find one common word we can both understand — then, “Ah! Ah! Ah!” Li cries in delight, when he gets it.

With his irrepressible good cheer, boundless energy, and utter sincerity, Editor Li is not to be denied. No wonder his eight community newspaper start-ups have been so successful. He gets it: community journalism is all about social capital and relationship building and maintenance.

I think to myself, Editor Li would be fun to work for – fun to work WITH.

In fact, that just might happen.

He has a vision of creating the first-ever Chinese academic program in Community Journalism at his local university, and appears to have the support of the academic leaders at Foshan University.

On the way to one town-hall style meeting with readers, he turns from the steering wheel and challenges, “Want to join me!?” Almost driving off the road with childish excitement. Only a fool would refuse my irrepressible younger Chinese brother.

When we walk into the room, about 30 elderly readers leap to their feet and began applauding, hands held over their heads to clap. (Now, when's the last time I saw a newspaper publisher get that kind of reception?)

But Editor Li is not there to accept their adulation. He introduces me as "the godfather of Chinese community journalism."

Can I put that on my vita?

He's there to get feedback about the new community weekly he started earlier this year. The seniors are led by a Mr. Zhao, a 60-something articulate retiree, who tells us, that prior to the new newspaper, the neighborhood had felt ignored.

"Your newspaper is a pioneer, and gives us a voice," he says. And he requests help from the paper in organizing more activities for the seniors...some sort of a dance club or sports team, he suggests.

"I will find the money for you!" Editor Li responds. "You organize it, and we'll help." And he continues, "We should put all our resources together to make you happier to live in this community. If you have good ideas, maybe we can publish it in the newspaper, and other people will want to help."

Little wonder Ed. Li's paper is so popular. Mr. Zhao praises the young women reporters: "They work a lot in the community. They dig out the news. They make friend with the seniors. They are not arrogant. When they see me, they say things like 'Hello, Uncle Zhao!'"

Then Mr. Zhao says the most remarkable thing: "The best thing about this community newspaper is that you can constructively criticize the government. The party newspaper — it's a mouthpiece, and we don't care about it. But we like this newspaper because it talks about us! We read every page!"

Asked to give a specific example of how the newspaper had helped, Mr. Zhao recalls how he had complained to the local government about a huge pothole in the road. Nothing happened. After two to three months with no response, he gave up and called the paper. Within two days of the story's publication, the pothole was fixed.

And here's the really good thing: Prof Chen Kai explains that in the more progressive and liberal southern province of Guangdong, "local government here is not offended when the newspaper is critical."

Ed Li is pleased. "I want to use my heart to do something useful for the citizens, to help resolve some of their problems... that's my slogan."

We hear the same themes at a visit to a second start-up of 2014, the Qiao Shan News, where the local government leader, introduced to me as "Mr. Dragon," says local government donated office space so that "citizens can come talk with journalists...to help collect residents' demands, because the government has to listen to the concerns of the citizens, and that makes the government more effective when it makes decisions."

I'm starting to get it now. Under the Chinese system, the ponderous multi-levelled local governmental bureaucracy gets in the way of documenting feedback from just plain

folks.

"The community newspaper serves as a conduit for collecting public opinion," Mr. Dragon tells me, and this is a very important and valuable function.

Disgruntled citizens can even talk to reporters about "sensitive issues...that might be too sensitive to be published," — the American equivalent of "deep background," which, though "off the record," still needs to be passed on and documented.

Editor Li agrees. "We want the newspaper to be a bridge between the citizens and the government."

We meet Mr. Yang, a 77-year-old former government worker, who serves as a "citizen journalist" for the paper — as a trusted source and tipster. After he complained to the paper about the lack of bus stops in Qiao Shan, two more bus stops were added.

Later that day, we are joined at Starbucks by Tang Wan, a 42-year-old editor-in-chief of Editor Li's group of eight papers. Before joining Editor Li's team, she'd worked for years on the big metro dailies; she likes community journalism better, she tells us. And, most importantly, she buys into Li's vision for the future of journalism in China.

"We feel as if Editor Li can see into the future," she tell us over cappuccino, "This is the appropriate time to introduce Community Journalism into our society...though our papers are small in size, they are not at all small in their influence in their communities."

To be sure, these Chinese newspapers get their start-up and some operating capital from the government, a fact of life here that wouldn't fly in the good old U.S. of A. Be that as it may, after three years of marginal success, last year Li's papers began raking in serious local advertising dollars – good old fashioned capitalism. The newspapers, (tabloid, 16 pages, free weekly, average circulation of 50k) are "100 percent local and very profitable."

When I asked her if she sees Ed. Li as a pathfinder, she demurred, "Ask him yourself."

So I did. And Li, ever the humble Chinese, said this: "We are confident in our strengths, but we will never name ourselves as the leader."

Prof. Chen Kai was more forthright: "He sets a good example for what Chinese Community Journalism should be. Your first priority is to serve your community. And THEN money will come. You have to be patient!"

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At the end of the day, I'm thinking, so here's a publisher who puts people first and profits second. Here's a publisher who wants to serve the greater good. Yes, he does work with and takes money from the government, after having convinced them of the value of community journalism. Does that make him a lapdog?

Me, the hard-core First Amendment wonk, is thinking: This ain't exactly watchdog

journalism. But, as I am repeatedly told, "This is China!" So this is progress. I keep going back to the rhetorical question posed by my lifelong buddy and journalism professor, Steven Knowlton of Dublin City University. And Prof. Knowlton is speaking specifically of China here when he ponders:

"How do you do good journalism if you don't have a free press? The answer, of course, is, eventually, Community Journalism."

Conclusion

With the U.S. and China saber-rattling in a military cat-and-mouse game over the disputed waters in the South China Sea, one wonders at the future of the Sino-US relationship. President Obama speaks of an American "pivot" in the Pacific. But there is another type of "pivot" going on — and it is within China itself.

With 316 million Internet users, China's exploding middle class is increasingly connected and demanding information and finding out truth — in spite of the government's sometimes ham-handed attempts to slap down the outliers. But the horse is out of the barn. The government cannot fully quench the e-voices of the information-hungry youth, especially the youth.

In our attempt to understand any culture so old, huge, complex and enigmatic as China, it is tempting to draw simplistic generalizations. Certainly, as a Westerner trying to get his head around China, I was guilty of that transgression at first. But now, five years into my Chinese immersion, I'm detecting chinks in the armor of what I had predetermined to be a vast, monolithic political system that exercised complete and utterly unforgiving control of the media. Here lately my research reveals a different and more porous media landscape.

To be sure, China will never be the Sweden of Asia — but it is morphing, and at times, right before our eyes. Why else would Beijing allow community newspapers to start up, spread and flourish here in the last five years if the government didn't somehow see this new form of media as a benefit to the party and to the nation as a whole? This attitudinal shift I'm seeing is away from viewing media as a threat, and more of as an ally, a partner in community-building, and especially as a tool to help combat the wide-spread political corruption that renders much of local Chinese government so inept.

So yes, maybe government is using newspapers to serve as their "junkyard dog," to do the heavy-lifting of "keeping 'em honest." There is the hope for the future — that community newspapers are ushering in "accountability journalism," even though it's not the sort of relentlessly local "watchdog journalism" that we enjoy in the U.S. But it is a start. And again, because, "This is China," that's a giant step in the right direction.

I'll leave the last word to my colleague Chen Kai of the Communication University of

China in Beijing, the Chinese professor who masterminded the revision and translation of "Community Journalism: Relentlessly Local" into Mandarin earlier this summer.

"You say you are planting seeds of community journalism in China — which is good," she says, but then adds wisely, "But what grows out of Chinese soil will be Chinese."