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## **From Communism to Nationalism: China's Press in the Transition of Dominant Ideology**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper documents the shift of the dominant ideology in China from communism to the Party-led nationalism. Within a theoretical framework of media hegemony, this paper identifies the Party-led nationalism as a hegemonic ideology, which is constructed from the top to legitimate the ruling of the Party. This paper investigates how China's press behaves during such transition of dominant ideology in past 20 years. In late 1970s, China's press functioned as a site of top level faction warfare among Party elites with diverging ideologies and later some as an independent force participated in the ideological struggle in late 1980s. During recent commercialization, two modes of press have

emerged in China: party propaganda press and commercialized press. China's commercialized press, operating in a market system with a close Party supervision, in order to survive, first has to yield to the pressure from the Party and then from the market. In this sense, the press performs dual missions: "toeing the party line and making money" (He, 2003, p.201) by commercializing the Party-led nationalism. Repackaged patriotism thus becomes a good commodity for China's commercialized press. Most press in China has been transformed from a propaganda apparatus to the current "Party publicity Inc", which is perfectly fit into the media hegemony analysis of the media role in modern society to maintain the status quo. This paper also explores how China's press profits anti-Western sentiment as a theme of nationalism in international news coverage and is highly hegemonic in promoting the anti-western theme.

### **From Communism to Nationalism: China's Press in the Transition of Dominant Ideology**

In the past twenty years, China has undergone tremendous political and economic changes, and witnessed the collapse of the communist ideology and the rising nationalism. China's press actively participates in ideological destruction and reconstruction. This paper first traces the role of China's press in post Mao's ideological struggles, and then investigates how Chinese's press has been caught among party-state control, nationalism and commercialization. In order to survive in current China, politically and economically, the

commercialized press has to perform dual missions: “toeing the party line and making money” (He, 2003, p.201) by commercializing the Party-led nationalism.

### **The Role of Press in Ideological Struggle after Mao**

China in the late 1970s witnessed a decline of once dominated ideology: Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. In Mao's era (1949-1976), the press was tightly controlled by the Party, especially through its propaganda departments at various levels and fitted in the classical Communist model: the Party-state has a complete control of mass communication as well as the journalism profession (Lee, 1994). The press served as the instrument of ideological control of the Party and functioned as the mouthpiece of the Party with unified one voice for “command communication” (Wu, 2000, p.45) rather than the source and channel for social information. The ideological propaganda and penetration reached absurdity during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Those who dared openly expressed their discontent would find themselves labeled as enemies of the people (Hood, 1994).

In 1976, after the death of Mao, the Party divided into two factions: the Maoists and the reformers headed by Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang. The Maoists who stuck to the dogma Mao Zedong Thought controlled the central propaganda apparatus. On February 1977, they published an editorial in the People's Daily, to declare that “Whatever policy decisions were made by Chairman Mao must be resolutely upheld by us. Whatever instructions were given by Chairman Mao

must be firmly and unwaveringly followed by us at all time.” (Goldman, 1994, p.24) The reformers managed to bypass the newspapers controlled by Maoists, and published their counter attack articles in Theoretical Trends, the Guangming Daily and China Youth. These newspapers became major forum to criticize Maoist policies. For the first time, since 1949, the dominant ideology in China was challenged and the press functioned as a debate platform for ideological discussions, although the ideological struggle was within the political establishment.

In the first ideological discussion, the press functioned as a site of top level faction warfare among Party elites rather than an independent force participating in the ideological struggle. However the press affiliated to the reformers was not only attacking the Maoists and their ideology, but also beginning to question the essential components of Marxist-Leninism: planned economy and highly centralized power even to discuss whether democracy served as a prerequisite to economic reform (Goldman, 1994). The press’s advocacy of reform on one hand helped Deng eradicate the ideological and psychological obstacles to his economic reform (Zhao. S, 1998) and get rid of Maoists. On the other hand the press planted the seed of democracy among intellectuals as well as public by openly attacking Mao’s personal cult, criticizing the highly centralized power, and advocating democracy.

### **The Press in the 1989 Tiananmen Pro-Democratic Movement**

In the early years of Deng's era, the press was saturated with pro economic reform propaganda. Media agenda were occupied by the reformers headed by Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, who tried to establish market economy's official position in the Party's economic ideology to replace the old central planned economy. The pro economic reform became the dominant theme in press coverage.

To facilitate their economic reform, Hu and Zhao began to experiment their political reforms. Between 1986 and early 1988, the atmosphere within the Party and government was unusually friendly to political reform ideas. On August 30th, 1986, the People's Daily published an editorial headlined "Political issues are open to discuss" (The People's Daily, 1986). In March, 1988, when National People's Congress convened, the dissenting voices and votes in the Congress and panel discussions were unprecedentedly reported in the press.

The political-reform friendly atmosphere is a significant factor in enabling certain newspapers to emerge as kind of quasi-independent voice in late 1980s. In the past, all press in China, was affiliated to either reformers or hardliners, both considered official and operated within the established party-state system. The emerging newspapers in late 1980s were a significant departure from the traditional mouthpiece role of China's press. These newspapers were nominally attached to official organizations but they had total journalistic autonomy in deciding what to publish (Goldman, 1994). They criticized the hardliner's rigid position and sympathized with the reformers but not automatically echoed the

reformers' voice. They were no longer the site of top level warfare of the Party.

They had their own mind. These newspapers actively participated in ideological building and advocated pro-democracy and liberal ideas.

The case of the World Economic Herald best illustrated the role of independent press in late 1980s. The Herald, although nominally affiliated to the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, ran as a quasi-private paper. It published articles without obtaining approval from the party's propaganda department. Its editor argued that the Party had no jurisdiction over the Herald because it was financially independent and 47 other newspaper like the Herald which was run by their own money should be free from the party and state control (Goldman, 1994). Such independent press and journalists helped to "enlarge the democratic movement far beyond a student movement" (Goldman, 1994, p.31).

There was no doubt that such independent press is protected by the reformers within the Party. In addition to independent press, official press also became a battle field of different political factions. Even the People's Daily exhibited inconsistent coverage of student's movement because of conflicting directives from both reformers and hardliners within the party.

Overall, the press plays a "pivotal role" (Goldman, 1994, p.34) in mobilizing and educating public and promoting the pro democracy agenda in late 1980s. The emerging independent press although short lived, which were all closed down after the Tiananmen incident, suggested that the press did no longer wish to

act as propaganda apparatus to promote party's ideology and began to exert influence on public and struggle for their legitimacy outside the party-state system. After the reversal of reform policy and crack down of pro democratic movement, press in China has never regained such independency and active role in ideological building.

### **The Rise of Nationalism as Hegemonic Ideology**

After Tiananmen incident, maintaining stability became a central theme of the leadership of the CCP. Reforms were halted and reformers had to retreat. The conservative dominated the policy agenda till 1992. In late 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union provided an impetus for the conservatives to take a harder line and smother any reform attempts. A retrenching policy was adopted and economic growth slowed down.

The slow economic growth, the Tiananmen incident and the collapse of the Soviet Union could be seen bankruptcy of the long held official ideology: Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. The legitimacy of the ruling party was seriously weakened.

As the result of demise of official ideology, there was a prevailing hopeless feeling in China. The Party publicly acknowledged that there were three belief crises: crisis of trust in the Party, crisis of faith in socialism, and crisis belief in Marxism (Chen, 1995). The Communism became incapable of enlisting mass support for the Party's leadership. The discrediting of communism has caused

an ideological gap (Mitter, 2000). The Party has to look for a new ideology to inspire unity and build its own political capital for its legitimate ruling.

Nationalism is therefore being reconfigured in China to reflect the Party's identity and legitimacy in the face of rapidly changing political and economic environments in early 1990s.

Many political science scholars have reached the consensus that the Party actively promoting nationalism as the dominant ideology in China (Frank, 1996; Friedman, 1997; Mitter, 2000; Zhao. S, 1998; Zhao. Y, 2000). Friedman explicitly noted that “an extraordinarily strong nationalism infuses elite political circles in Beijing at the end of the twentieth century” (Friedman, 1997, p5). Media scholars also identify that as Communist ideology is in full retreat, the Party “seeks to repackage media representations in nationalist terms” (Pan, Lee, Chan and Clemet, 2001, p.3).

### **The Party-Led Nationalism in China**

The concept of nationalism is understood in Chinese as patriotism, which in Chinese literally means “love the state” (Zhao. S, 1998). The Party differentiates patriotism from parochial nationalism, as General Secretary Jiang Zemin emphasized, in 1990, that “the patriotism we advocate is by no means a parochial nationalism.” (Jiang, 1990). In 1991, the Party's Central Propaganda Department first issued official document to promote patriotism, “Circular on fully using cultural relics to conduct education in patriotism and revolutionary



traditions". In November 1994, the Party's Central Propaganda Department, the State Education Commission, the Ministry of Broadcast, Film, and Television, and the Ministry of Culture jointly issued a "Circular on carrying out education in patriotism in primary and secondary schools throughout the country by films and television" (Xu, 2001). It clearly suggested that Chinese patriotism is a Party originated and Party centered ideology. If Tilly used the term a "state-led nationalism" which means "rulers who spoke in a nation's name successfully demanded that citizens identify themselves with that nation and subordinate other interests to those of the state." (Tilly, 1995, p. 190, as cited in Zhao S, 1998, p.290-291), in China, the term of nationalism should be understood as a Party-led nationalism, which demands public identify themselves with the Party. The Party-led nationalism "portrays the Party as the embodiment of the nation's will" and creates a sense of loyalty and nationhood among all its citizens (Zhao. S, 1998, p.291). The Party also deliberately blurred the lines between nationalism, socialism, and communism (Zhao. S, 1998). It was shown in the People's Daily editorial on October 1st, 1996, the National Day: "Patriotism is specific... Patriotism requires us to love the socialist system and road chosen by all nationalities in China under the leadership of the Communist Party" (The People's Daily, 1996).

The Party-led nationalism in China can be understood as a cluster of legitimation techniques described by Holmes (1993) that both use and create nationalist sentiments in the public and a tool employed by the regime to

strengthen its legitimacy. The Party-led nationalism ideology in China works as legitimating device: the China's Communist Party is treated as integrated part of the national identity, which enable the Party to rebuild the legitimacy of the post-Tiananmen leadership on a basis of non-Communist ideology: belonging to China thus naturally means to accept and embrace the leadership of the Communist Party.

A close examination of the Party-led nationalism as legitimating device and the concept of hegemony suggests a clear connection. This instrumental understanding of the Party-led nationalism as legitimating device reveals its hegemonic function on promoting consent among society members.

### **The Party-led Nationalism as Hegemonic Ideology**

The foregoing analysis has shown that the rising nationalism is result of a party-led ideological campaign. Media hegemony theory provides a framework to understand the role of press in China on promoting the Party-led nationalism.

The concept of hegemony described by Gramsci (1971) stated that the ruling groups maintain the status quo and control of the society through consent rather than force such as the military and police. In current China, classical Communist model of total control of mass communication and massive crack down of anti-Communist Party actions and ideas would no longer effective in maintaining the Party's ruling. More over the outdated propaganda through

mouth piece press of China became counter productive. The Party has to reconfigure nationalism into hegemonic ideology and use press to serve its ends.

Hegemony defined by Gramsci refers to the process by which the ruling groups, through their privileged access to social institutions such as the media, promote values that maintain their control over the society. These values form a hegemonic ideology. Ideology is the key element in understanding hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci further suggested that ideology is an important level where the ruling group exercised the hegemonic power. The ruling groups actively seek to have their ideology legitimized and accepted by all members of society as the common sense. The ruling group's ideology becomes hegemonic "when it is widely accepted as describing the way things are, inducing people to consent to the institutions and practices dominant in their society and its way of life" (Kellner, 1990, p.17).

Hegemony is neither permanent nor unalterable (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). According to Gramsci (1971), hegemony can never be complete or final. People are active agents, and could resist, question and even challenge the hegemonic ideology imposed by the ruling groups. Especially when the society undergoes a rapidly changing historical and social environment and such changes will make certain hegemonic ideology untenable. As shown in this study, the shift of dominant ideology from Marxist-Leninist to the Party-led nationalism clearly illustrates the dynamic aspect of hegemonic ideology.

Media play an important role in promoting hegemony. Giltin (1980) postulated that “mass media have become core system for the distribution of ideology” (p.2) and “such ideological force is central to the continuation of the established order” (p.9). Hall (1982) studied how mass media fit into the concept of hegemony and argued that mass media are one of the principle sites where the hegemony is exercised. By “the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping”, the media are actively “making things mean” (Hall, 1982, p.64). Hallin (1987) also suggested the political function of the media. The media play the role of maintaining the dominant political ideology and the media themselves are subject to the hegemonic process. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argued that hegemonic ideology is integrated into the news coverage and accepted as natural by the society. The media hegemony idea rejects the traditional propaganda mode of ideological imposition and places emphasis to the cultural and social leadership of the dominant ideology.

### **The Press in Promoting Party-Led Nationalism**

Situated on media hegemony analysis, this study argues that the Party-led nationalism in China should be understood as a hegemonic ideology functioning as a legitimating device and therefore is an important force influencing China’s press behavior, journalistic profession as well as shaping public’s nationalistic attitude.

During past decades, China has undergone the transition from a Communist authoritarian state to an authoritarian state with an booming market economy (Pan, et al, 2001). In 1994, market economy finally secured its official position as the Party's economic ideology and thus generated a huge wave of marketization. Scholars studying Chinese press have reached consensus that it is outdated to explain China's media through traditional party propaganda model (Guo and Chen, 1997; Zhao. Y, 1998; Yong, 2000; Huang, 2001; Pan, 2002).

The most significant change in China's press sector is its rapid commercialization in the transition. Commercialization of press according to Zhao.Y, (1998, p.181) has led to an elaborate press infrastructure, made the press "more responsive to readers and audience...modified the elitism" of the press and "given rise to popular sensibilities."

A number of scholars have attempted to build a framework to analyze Chinese press under the commercialization and have reached the agreement that there are two major forms of press in current China: party propaganda press and commercialized press (Polumbaum, 1994 as cited in Guo and Chen; Guo and Chen, 1997; Zhao. Y, 1998; Huang, 2001). As Zhao, Y argues that press in China "can be explained neither by the Party principle nor by market force alone." (1998, p.151).The major characteristics of propaganda press and commercialized press are summarized in [Table 1](#).

As shown in [Table 1](#), commercialized press is a new departure from traditional propaganda press, but press commercialization doesn't necessarily mean press freedom. Market competition may provide the Party authorities another tool to control the press, because the terms of competition and rules of the market are set by the Party and government. The commercialized press has certain autonomy, but the party-state system in China still exerts visible influence in those commercialized press. The commercialized press in order to survive the market competition and retain legitimacy has to toe the party line. As Wu (2000) argued that the profit making are making the Chinese media more independent from the party-state.

Currently in China, in addition to the Party-led nationalism, two ideological ideas still have certain influences among public. Although the traditional Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong has dead but a neo-Marxism has emerged instead. In China it was called "neo-left" ideology which attacks the rising capitalism, corruption among cadres and privatization of state owned industry, and advocates for restructuring the Party to better represent labor and peasants. In 2001 summer, two marginal Marxist theoretical journals were forced to close for their critique of the Party's capitalist restoration (Zhao. Y, 2003). The other ideology is liberal democracy which was manifested in the late 1980s political reforms such as freedom of expression, the rule of law and separation of the three branches of the state. Such principles are well received among intellectuals and many ordinary people do share some components of

those liberal democracy ideas (Zhou, 1998, p.603), but it has always been repressed by the Party. Interestingly, unlike political liberalism, economic liberalism with corporatist and consumerist discourses dominate the Chinese press in recent years, the commercialized press in particular (Zhao. Y, 2003).

In order to survive in today's China, China's press first has to yield to the pressure from the Party and then from the market. Among the competing ideological ideas, patriotism is the most sensible and viable ideology to embrace. China's press always re-pitches "its ideological tune to patriotism whenever it is possible" (Zhou, 2003, p.203).

In China, however selling the officially endorsed ideology packaged in propaganda rhetoric is a doomed business, since the public has a strong resentment for traditional Party propaganda (Zhou, 2003). Patriotism is the ideological appeal that enjoys a large customer base for various reasons. Lee stated that the press in China "actively profit from the market with legitimating power of the Party ideology" (Lee, 2003, p.17). In this sense, as described by He (2000), the press in China has been transformed from a propaganda apparatus to the current "Party publicity Inc", which is perfectly fit into the media hegemony analysis of the media role in modern society to maintain the status quo. An important theme of the Party-led nationalism is anti-western sentiment (Xu, 2001). Since the domestic affairs are full of sensitive issues, the press has found a niche in international reporting: following the party line and selling anti-western nationalism is safe and profitable. As media scholars state

whereas the party finds prickly xenophobic nationalism politically useful to fill up the ideology vacuum, the media also harness it to their commercial advantage (Pan, 2001). The Chinese audience, which has been through a decade patriotic campaign, develops a great appetite for such commodity, especially the Chinese youth, who are susceptible to nationalistic appeals for a rich and powerful China, and believe China is now contained by western countries led by the United States. The problems in current China, in their eyes, are not resulted from China's political and social systems, but from the containment of western powers.

A good example is Rosen's analysis of the coverage of the US bombing China's embassy in 1999 May (Beijing Youth Daily, 1999; Rosen, 1998, 110-112). The Beijing Youth Daily, a Beijing based commercialized newspaper published a widely read series of articles, which ran for a week with a theme of reassessing the United States and were full of critics of the United States. These articles ridiculed the US congress for passing laws and resolutions that put US law above international law as well as human right in US. Students were quoted in the stories about how they lost their illusions about the United States. One of the articles talked about freedom of press and dismissed it as instrument merely serving the interests of the United States (Rosen, 1998, pp.111-112). One of the articles "quoted" the comments from MSNBC like (bombing is a) "Good job". Since common Chinese audience has no access to foreign TV reporting, the quotations were hardly verified. They thus evoked heavy "emotional



responses intended” (Rosen, 1998, p.112). This is very representative case of how new commercialized newspaper profiting the anti-western sentiment, given the fact that Beijing Youth Daily is a reformist paper, which has been at the forefront of recent journalist innovations and also a commercially successful and targeting the young urban middle class (Zhao. Y, 1998, p.51) are following party’s practice in their hegemonic process.

He (2003, p.204) provided another good example of how commercialized press made profit through anti-America sentiment: the coverage of spy plane crisis in 2001, April. Only in a couple of days, these commercial newspapers gave a quick response. The Global Times (a Beijing based international news oriented newspaper) carried 26 stories; the Xinmin Evening News (a Shanghai based tabloid) carried 66 stories. Many of the stories relayed the information released by Xinhua News Agency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, both officially synchronized sources. He argued that this conflict was a good opportunity “to boost circulation” through such a “commercially profitable product” (2003, p.204). In international reporting, through selective inclusion and omission, the current press in China is highly hegemonic in promoting the anti-western theme. This strategy has paid off. For CCP, the ruling party, it helps to cultivate “increasing suspicion and distrust” of the western countries, the United States in particular, and justify the motivation for the party’s “self-serving” policy (Rosen, 2003, p.107).

## **CONCLUSION**

In the past two decades, the China has experienced transition of the dominant ideology from communism to the Party-led nationalism. Between late 1970s and 1980s, the press served as a prime site for the ideological struggle and rebuilding. Except for a short period in late 1980s, China press itself hardly emerges as an independent force to participate in the ideological negotiation. It either functions as the mouth pieces of the Party like the propaganda press or as the Party publicity Inc like the commercialized press. The on-going marketization only gives rise to the change in style of how to repackage and commercialize Party-led nationalism rather than any meaningful institutional changes leading to a free press.

The rising Party-led nationalism highlighted one problem: “lack of content” (Pye, 1993, p.126). The nationalism is reduced to the expression of “the sum of the Party’s policy preferences” (Zhao. S, 1998, p.300). The lack of rich content enables China’s press to deliberately smuggle its own components or interpretations into the repackaged nationalism. For marketing purpose, the press always sensationalizes the news stories and carries some radical nationalistic ideas to attract audience and further cultivate nationalist fervor among young people. Some ideas really deviate from the Party’s stances in domestic and international issues. The Party-led nationalism becomes a double edge sword. As Holmes (1993) pointed out that the ruling group that uses nationalism as a legitimating device may in turn be forced to follow up by satisfying a nationalist public opinion. The rising nationalistic fervor may pose

potential threats to the Party. The Party may be well aware of such threat.

[Figure 1](#) shows that recently the People's Daily, the most influential official newspaper of the Party seems to cool off the nationalist rhetoric and return to some classical communism discourse in terms of word occurrence. Does the communism discourse simply serve as vague and abstract ritualized rhetoric? Or does the shift in patriotisms discourse suggest that the Party is seeking alternative ideological or political manipulation such as repackaging communism with new components? How does Chinese commercialized press handle its incongruence with the Party official press, who seems to reduce the patriotism propaganda recently? Future comparative content analysis may reveal some meaningful findings.

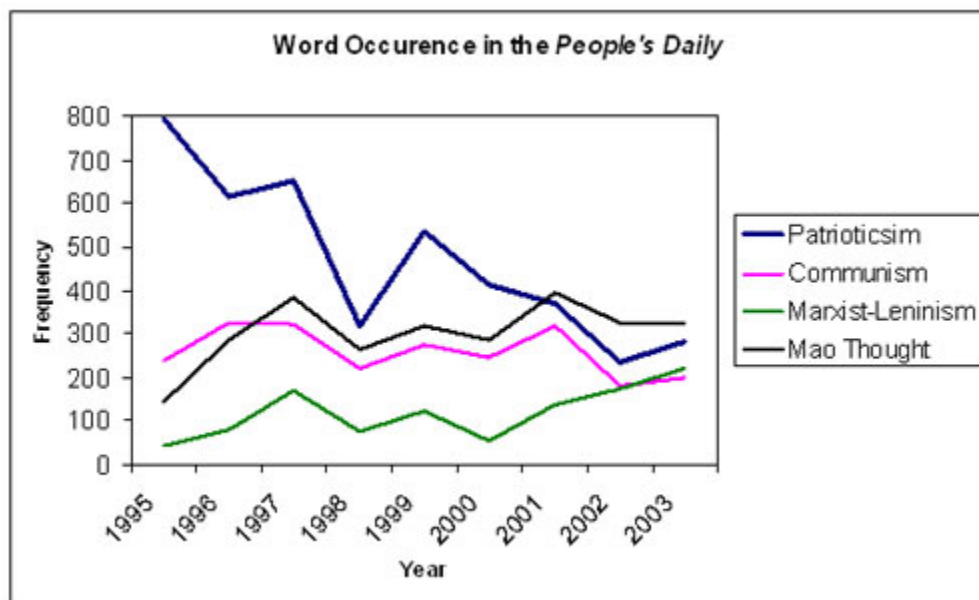
**Table 1**

*Major Characteristics of Propaganda Press and Commercialized Press*

|                     | <b>Propaganda Press</b>  | <b>Commercialized Press</b>  |
|---------------------|--|--|
| <b>Journalism</b>   | <p>Party Journalism:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) stick to the Party's guiding ideology</li> <li>2) propagate the Party's programs, policies and directives</li> <li>3) stick to the Party's organizational principles and press policies</li> </ol> <p>(Zhao. Y, 1998, p.19)</p> | <p>Tabloid Journalism:</p> <p>Profit-driven and sensationalism</p> <p>(Guo and Chen, 1997, p.37)</p>   |
| <b>Orientation</b>  | <p>Propaganda Orientation:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Ideological education</li> <li>2) Promotion of Party's policies</li> <li>3) Organization of actions to achieve Party's goal</li> </ol> <p>(Pan and Lu, 2003, p219)</p>  | <p>Reader Orientation:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Information</li> <li>2) Entertainment</li> </ol> <p>(Pan and Lu, 2003, p.219)</p> |
| <b>Financing</b>    | Subsidized by the Party  | Financially self-sufficient  |
| <b>Subscription</b> | Compulsory subscriptions at all level government agencies  | News stand<br>Voluntary subscription   |
| <b>Example</b>      | The People's Daily   | Beijing Youth Daily  |

## Figure 1

Some Key Word Occurrence in the *People's Daily* between 1995 and 2003



Source: [www.people.com.cn](http://www.people.com.cn) (Official website of the *People's Daily*)

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