Along with so many aspects of Chinese society, the country’s media have undergone vast changes in recent years, but the implications of those changes have not been fully appreciated outside of the country, argues Hu Xijin, the editor-in-chief of the Beijing-based Global Times. He defends what he describes as the uniquely Chinese characteristics of the country’s media.

SEEN ALONGSIDE the media industry globally, mainland Chinese media outlets are something of a peculiarity. They have developed rapidly, and any form of media found in the West now exists in China. China’s media can now be said to be in the lead in Asia, both in terms of economic scale and capacity for generating news content. As China develops and its influence grows, there is a clear upward trend in its international influence.

Nevertheless, when Chinese and Western journalists rub shoulders, the latter tend to view their Chinese counterparts as oddities. When citing reports from Chinese media, Western reporters are still in the habit of pinning them with the label “official media.” In many cases, this phrase is used in a derogatory way. Given that most Western media are privately owned, these journalists look on China’s state-owned media with mistrust, and this mistrust blinds them to the changes that have occurred in China’s media in recent years.

The West’s attitude toward China’s media and government is not entirely unfounded. The problem comes when the West’s view is stagnant and unchanging. Chinese media are in the midst of dramatic change and development, and the relationship between Chinese media, their readers and the market is also undergoing historic change. But Western appraisals often disregard these facts, and misunderstandings are perpetuated.
CHANGE AND CONTINUITY
Since the mid-1990s, when economic reforms deepened in China, Communist Party newspapers have, perhaps without exception, launched their own commercial newspapers directed at the urban market. Referred to as “metro newspapers,” they are connected to the party newspaper system and are overseen by people who are also managers of their associated party newspapers. Over the past decade, however, metro newspapers have expanded their reporting about Chinese society. They now deal with pressing issues of public welfare and even politics, expressing their views, for example, on bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption.

The Internet’s rise in China came after the initial wave of metro newspapers. But today, the commercial newspapers all have their own Web sites, and the vast majority of stories drawing public attention on the Web are sourced from these media. While Internet chat forums are lively spaces in China, it is still the metro newspapers that draw the greatest attention from ordinary people.

It is a fact that no media in China are free from the direct control and influence of the Chinese Communist Party. As a massive political organization with more than 100 million members, the CCP makes its influence felt in every aspect of Chinese life and society. But the media as a whole do not object to their relationship with the government. There are almost no voices in China arguing that media should free themselves from the party’s leadership in order to form private companies like those in the West. Even if a small minority might argue this, it is certainly not the dominant direction and ambition of the media profession.

There are a small number of commercial Internet sites in China that are listed companies backed by individuals and shareholders, but these are not news media in the true sense. They are limited to re-publishing articles from newspapers, and they are prevented from generating their own news content.

The role of the media in national life has remained stable over the past few years. A number of publishing houses and arts troupes have been pushed in the direction of corporatization due to operational difficulties, but for newspapers such changes are rarely pursued. A handful of metro newspapers have experimented with setting up profit-making companies, but these companies only handle the circulation and advertising sales sides of the business. News production remains under the original party leadership system.

Despite this, the content and style of news reports is changing markedly. What are the forces driving these changes?

THE FRONT LINES OF CHANGE
As with so much else in China, the economic reforms themselves are drivers of change. As China is transformed, the Chinese Communist Party constantly changes its approach to managing the news media. The party’s work style is being modernized, and the government is becoming more transparent. This has meant that a substantial unconstrained space has opened up for news reports. On the surface, this is most evident in the metro newspapers. But metro newspapers have served as test cases for media reform, and the changes driven by these papers and by the Internet have rippled through the industry. The entire approach to news coverage has changed.

Take China’s party newspapers. More than a decade ago, major party newspapers at the provincial level published four to eight pages of content. Today, they tend to have between 20 and 30 pages. In some areas, party newspapers are known for their outspokenness. Guangzhou Daily, the official party newspaper of Guangzhou, is one of China’s most vibrant newspapers, with a substantial advertising base.

Since they are on the front lines of reform, China’s commercial metro newspapers remain quite sensitive to the political and economic factors driving change in the media. Given that they remain affiliated with party newspapers, the bosses of the metro newspapers maintain respect for the party leadership. But these papers receive no financial support from the government and must rely entirely on revenues from circulation and advertising. In fact, in addition to their commercial
burdens, they must also pass a portion of their profits up to the party newspaper. These media are thus entirely exposed to China’s media market, and they are deeply rooted in the public. It can be said that the development of metro newspapers has happened by virtue both of the will of the state and of popular demand.

The success of the metro newspaper business model has had an impact on all media and related organizations. They represent a successful model under the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party but at the same time are welcomed by the public. The success of this model has prompted changes in other areas as well, such as publishing houses, which have been pushed in the direction of corporatization even though the vast majority of metro papers do not themselves operate as companies.

SERVE THE READERS
The reliance on advertising and sales rather than state funding has been an important factor driving change in China’s media. In the past, the media were responsible only to the government. Today, while minding the interests of the party, they must be receptive to the demands of readers, and they must meet the criteria of advertisers. If the newspapers do not serve their readers, they will fail in the marketplace and their very existence will be under threat.

It is important to remember that all of these changes were planned and promoted by the party and happened in step with China’s transition from a planned economy to a market economy. As China was transformed into a rich and diverse society, the media moved from being monolithic and bureaucratically managed to being an important mechanism for balancing various social interests and facilitating interaction between the government and the public. This is something Chinese society urgently needs.

Of course, the media has not just been reactive. It has also been the most active factor pushing social change in China. On the one hand, it is one force among many in the country’s dramatic story of change, but on the other, it has propelled this change forward. A vast amount of

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The job of the Chinese media is to work toward the prevention and elimination of divisions within society. This is not just an obligation from the government, it is what Chinese society demands of the media. Every society has its own unique nature, and every society requires media that are suited to its unique social needs.
information and ideas emerge in China’s media, and this chatter influences both the public and government officials.

As the media have pursued what is called in Chinese “supervision by public opinion,” (or the monitoring of power by the media under a party mandate), they have accelerated the development of transparency at the local government level. Their efforts are also inseparable from changes in the style of government. Now, the media often criticize government bureaus or officials when they go overboard in pronouncements of policy. But generally speaking, these points of friction are part of the normal grind of a society in transition.

HARMONIOUS MEDIA

Chinese society, however, is fundamentally different from the West in its structure and makeup. Decentralization of power and authority is a hallmark of Western society, which is marked by internal antagonism. Western journalists are participants in and instigators of this ethos of antagonism, and conflict is the standard by which a news story is judged. By contrast, Chinese society operates on an ethos of harmony.

Divisions in society have never been allowed unlimited expression. Likewise, Chinese media must be architects of social harmony. They cannot approach social division and tension in the same manner as their Western counterparts, who throw conflicts into sharp relief and dwell on them. The job of the Chinese media is to work toward the prevention and elimination of divisions within society. This is not just an obligation from the government, it is what Chinese society demands of the media. Every society has its own unique nature, and every society requires media that are suited to its unique social needs. Chinese media stand clearly and precisely where Chinese society needs them to stand.

Chinese society has less capacity to support and withstand the onslaught of unbridled information than Western societies. News reports that might have a minimal impact elsewhere would have a much more dramatic impact in China. Further, the effort required of a Chinese journalist to produce a news report is much greater than that required for journalists in the West. A report on how many people died in a mining accident would be quite routine in the West, for example, but in China such a report can be extremely difficult to dig out. In pursuing this kind of story, a reporter might face reprisals from an illegal mine boss and corrupt officials.

Nevertheless, thanks to the constant efforts of Chinese journalists, statistics on the number of dead in such disasters has moved out of the shadows and is now reported reliably and transparently. This is an example of how the Chinese media are growing stronger and have become part of the larger project of political reform.

State power, which was once only self-monitored, has gradually accepted monitoring by society, and as a result it is becoming more transparent. At the same time, the CCP maintains its strong authority. This state of affairs would be impossible in the West, but seeming contradictions are the way of the things in present-day China. It is a power structure with Chinese characteristics.

And within this uniquely Chinese dynamic, we are seeing emerge a media with Chinese characteristics. While the Western media may have provided China with technical lessons, the Chinese media and Chinese society will, as we say in China, “go through infinite transformations without turning from their original aim.”