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BOOK REVIEW

Media Politics in China: Improvising Power under Authoritarianism by Maria Repnikova, (2017). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

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Maria Repnikova challenges the Western idea that there is a straightforward conflict between Chinese journalists and the Chinese Communist Party or the state. She describes a 'web of complex negotiations' (3), with critical journalists bargaining for more space within the ambiguous boundaries for reporting that are set by the Party-state. However, she emphasises that the Party has been the 'band leader' in this relationship and 'consistently and uncompromisingly sets the tune' (207). Consequently, she believes this fluid state-dominated partnership has benefited the Party without damaging its legitimacy. Repnikova argues that the changes in this relationship under Xi Jinping have been ones of degree. However, as the Party-state continues to move away from a strategy of adaptation and reform towards a greater focus on repression, the relationship does seem to be changing more fundamentally from the one she identified. The increasing curbs on critical journalism also suggest the Chinese Communist Party is less convinced that this relationship is benefiting the Party and has concluded that the 'progressive, gradual change' (24) that critical journalists hoped to achieve threatened its hold on power.

Keywords: Chinese media; Chinese journalists; Wenquan earthquake; Maria Repnikova; media supervision; censorship; propaganda

Maria Repnikova's book is a major contribution towards our understanding of the relationship between the Party-state and the media in China. She focuses on what she calls 'critical journalism', including investigative, in-depth, editorial and human-interest coverage of contentious social issues (3–4). By investigating this relatively small group of journalists, rather than those working at more mainstream outlets, her aim is to 'uncover the pockets of dynamism in what otherwise may appear as a black box of state domination' (206). Her book describes 'the subtle dynamics of a fluid collaboration' which underpin the relationship between journalists and the Party-state (206).

The book is based on 120 semi-structured interviews with media practitioners, media and crisis management experts, and party and state officials, as well as close textual analysis of critical articles and the official discourse on the media in publications such as *QiuShi* (求是). Repnikova focuses on two case studies – coverage of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and coal mining disasters between 2004 and 2012. Her research was carried out between 2002 and 2012, and therefore after the 'golden age' of watchdog journalism in China in the 1990s (5). She has also talked to a number of her interviewees again over the last few years, and in the last chapter, she offers her thoughts on recent developments under Xi Jinping.

The strength of Repnikova's research undoubtedly lies in the interviews with journalists. They offer rich detail about how the journalists negotiated their relationship with the Party-state in, 'their pursuit of social justice and their quest to push the envelope of permissible reporting' (4). Repnikova says that in the years following the Tiananmen massacre, China's critical journalists concluded that 'pragmatism and compromise with authorities' was unavoidable (24). These journalists did not attempt to take on forbidden topics, including the Tiananmen massacre itself, separatist claims and pro-democracy movements. Instead they have positioned 'themselves as change-makers within the system' (22).

Repnikova shows how the opportunities for critical journalism in an authoritarian state such as China arise in a grey zone, in which it is unclear what is permitted and what is forbidden. This grey area has been mainly the result of the Party-state allowing limited supervision by the media (*yulun jiandu*, 舆论监督) 'as part of a higher objective of fostering top down accountability and responding to and guiding public opinion' (206). In particular, this has given critical journalists scope to provide some oversight of 'unruly local officials', exposing corruption and even some policy failings (30). As a number of authors have pointed out, the Party-state also concluded that greater openness was necessary to satisfy 'increasing demands by the public for timely and accurate information', following failings during crises such as the SARS outbreak in 2001/2 (Zhang, 2011: 5).

The fact that there are no clear rules about which stories journalists can report and exactly how they can cover them, has both advantages and disadvantages. Stern and Hassid show how ambiguities in the way the grey area is defined and interpreted within the propaganda system can cause anxiety and mean journalists often self-censor more than they need to (Stern and Hassid, 2012). However, Repnikova argues that these uncertainties also helped critical journalists push the boundaries of the permissible in their reporting, 'by reinterpreting official policies and working to bypass political restrictions in the haze of dynamic ambiguity' (10). Repnikova describes how journalists bargained for 'more space' to carry out their reporting while remaining consistent with the official interpretation of media supervision (107). In order to align themselves with the central state as closely as possible, they tended to focus on criticising officials at a local level, rather than national officials, and framing their criticisms in constructive terms. The result is 'a fluid, state-dominated partnership characterised by continuous improvisation' (10).

The journalists did sometimes also seek to bypass the censors. For example, 'savvy use of social media' enabled journalists to share articles, which had been deleted from their own publications, on their personal social media accounts or to get their readers to repost the articles indirectly (27). Local and national journalists would also collaborate on occasions to put stories out that could not get past the censors in a particular area.

After the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, the media were instructed to focus on positive stories. Nevertheless, critical journalists set out to investigate the deaths of as many as 5,000 students, showing that poor building standards had contributed to the large number of deaths in schools. Their reporting was possible because they placed most of the blame for mistakes on local officials and adopted a constructive tone (128). Repnikova says this case showed that

critical journalism can bring about only 'superficial improvements in governance' (111). The Party-state made some changes following the reports but did not address the lack of accountability and the failings in the supervision system which lay behind the poor building standards (129). Once the stories were published, the authorities moved to tightly restrict further reporting: subsequent media coverage was overwhelmingly positive, portraying the official rescue and rebuilding efforts as 'uniquely effective' (132).

Repnikova is clear that the relationship between the Communist Party and critical journalists is one-sided, with the Party firmly in control. She suggests that critical journalists are like artists in Cold War-era Hungary, who were described by Haraszti (1987) as residing in a 'velvet prison' binding them to the political status quo (27). Just as Stockmann found that media commercialisation had ultimately benefited the Party-state by improving 'the ability of the regime to persuade citizens because of the credibility boost that media marketisation entails' (2013: 43), Repnikova concludes that 'the regime's proactive engagement with journalists had fostered collaborative ties to the advantage of the former' (35).

The political environment critical journalists operate in has changed significantly since the period covered by Repnikova's research. Some of her interviewees told her that they felt disillusioned by the Party's tightening grip on the media under Xi Jinping (24). As Repnikova points out, there is now 'little space' for anyone outside the Party-state to play an oversight role (211). She suggests the environment in which critical journalists and other activists operate is 'reminiscent of the Mao period', with more people being jailed and the use of 'far-reaching coercive threats to induce self-censorship' (208). The 'line of political sensitivity' has clearly been redrawn, leaving much less scope for critical journalism (209). At the same time, there has been a 'much greater emphasis on the media's propaganda role, underlined by Xi's visit to CCTV, Xinhua News and *People's Daily* in 2016. Xi demands 'absolute loyalty' from journalists and stresses that the role of the media is the 'correct guidance' of public opinion (210).

Nevertheless, Repnikova argues that what we have seen are 'shifts of degree – not of the fundamental nature – of engagement between journalists and officials' (207). She suggests that the 'fluid collaboration framework' continues to underpin the relationship (214), and that journalists still 'creatively walk the thinning political line and investigate and discuss governance' (211). She says some journalists are also still prepared to challenge censorship, for example by using social media to by-pass pre-publication censorship, 'even if less openly and extensively than in the past' (93). She shows that there are 'pockets of political journalism', which although reduced in size, 'have managed to survive and redefine themselves in the Xi era' (213), including the social media platforms, Tencent and Sohu, and new state-sanctioned digital-only news outlets, such as *Pengpai* (*The Paper*) and *Jiemian* (212). It is also true that the business publications, *Caijing* and *Caixin*, have retained a reasonable degree of latitude in their reporting.

The difficulty of writing academic books and journal articles in an area such as Chinese politics is that it can be like trying to hit a moving target. As the Party-state has continued to refine and tighten its approach to media controls, the conclusion that the 'rules of the game for journalist-state interactions' remain 'largely the same' (214) seems increasingly difficult to sustain. Repnikova's study shows that 'activists and critical voices' occupied 'the weaker advisory role' and were therefore 'vulnerable to the shifting political objectives and sensitivities' (11). As the Party-state's support for media supervision has narrowed considerably, the ability of journalists to bargain with officials to gain extra space to carry out this supervision role has inevitably become much more limited.

It is also becoming much more difficult for journalists to bypass censorship. Since 2014, propaganda instructions have made it clear to media personnel that they must not post

content to official or personal social media accounts that 'violates regulations' or 'else face severe punishment' (China Digital Times, 2015). A number of Repnikova's interviewees confirmed that 'they are increasingly more careful about the way they use social media' (93). She also found that there was much less collaboration between local and national journalists, with 'local journalists increasingly more concerned with their personal safety and less idealistic' (91).

Many journalists have left the profession because they feel the scope for doing any genuine journalism, without taking unacceptable risks, is disappearing (Phillips, 2016). Some of the journalists Repnikova interviewed have moved into less politically sensitive jobs (211). There are also now fewer mainstream publications where critical journalists can operate. Repnikova mentions *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang Zhoumo*, 南方周末), until recently, one of China's most prominent 'liberal' papers, but which has seen its 'political freedom' significantly curtailed (211). Other victims of the Party-state's tightening grip on the media include the magazine *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (炎黄春秋) which was in effect shut down in 2016 (Mitchell, 2016). The authorities have also been stepping up efforts to prevent critical journalism online, including new regulations in 2017 requiring all online news services to be managed by party-sanctioned editorial staff (Reuters, 2017).

Whether the changes are simply ones of degree or something more fundamental, there is no doubt that there is now much more limited scope for critical journalism. Repnikova argues that the fluid, state-dominated partnership identified in her research benefited the Party-state without damaging its legitimacy. This prompts the question why the scope for critical journalism has been curbed to the extent that it has.

At a talk about her book at the School of Oriental and African Studies in November 2017, Repnikova put the shift in the Chinese Communist Party's approach to the media largely down to 'paranoia'. The Party's obsession with the fall of the Soviet Union does appear to have created a paranoia about how it can avoid a similar fate. In a 2012 speech, Xi asked, 'Why did the Soviet Union disintegrate? Why did the Soviet Communist Party collapse?' (Huang, 2013). David Shambaugh, director of the China Policy Program at George Washington University, says the CCP used to believe the answer was for the Party to adapt and reform, becoming more responsive to public opinion (Denyer, 2015). Allowing a certain amount of media supervision was part of this approach. However, around 2008–11 there seems to have been a growing fear in the CCP that this strategy would ultimately have the same outcome as *glasnost* in the Soviet Union. The growth of the internet and internet activism, including the use of social media at the time of the Sichuan earthquake and the Wenzhou train crash three years later, probably played a key part in this change, as did the Arab Spring in 2011. As Shambaugh has said, the result has been a shift away from the strategy of adaptation, towards an increasing emphasis on repression, which has intensified under Xi Jinping (Denyer, 2015). Repnikova also says that perceiving a long-term threat to the Party's ability to govern, Xi has 'opted for downplaying consultations in favour of recentralising his political base and silencing opposing voices' (219).

Joseph Heller writes in *Catch-22*, 'Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they aren't after you.' In her 2013 book, Stockmann observed that, 'At least for now, responsive authoritarianism helps the CCP to maintain its rule, but it also poses a risk for the survival of the regime' (7). Repnikova says that during the period on which her research focused, 'the tensions between the pay-offs and the costs embedded in maintaining limited media supervision, bottom up activism and fluid consultative governance' were 'increasingly coming onto the surface' (218).

Although the critical journalists Repnikova interviewed sought to avoid antagonising the authorities, they did nevertheless have an 'idealistic vision of contributing to progressive, gradual change', with the ultimate objective of 'transforming the system' (24). It is precisely this kind of gradual change, or peaceful evolution, that the Chinese Communist Party seems to fear. By delving 'into sensitive areas' such as social inequality, and providing 'an alternative framing to that deployed by propaganda journalists', critical journalists raised awareness of problems and failings in the country, sometimes even producing 'a wide public outcry' (5). Repnikova refers to an analysis by Landry and Stockmann after the Sichuan earthquake, which 'reveals a drop in public support for the Party-state following the publication of media investigations' (130). The CCP clearly concluded that they could no longer continue to straddle what Repnikova refers to as 'the treacherous line' of trying to show that they were responsive to public concerns, without threatening the stability of the regime (111).

If pragmatism and compromise with the authorities does not gain journalists sufficient scope to carry out some meaningful critical journalism, Repnikova believes there is the possibility of 'more radical engagements between the two parties in the future' (217). Some journalists have openly questioned tighter censorship. In 2016, *Caixin* published a story on its English language website criticising censorship. In a comment on Weibo, Hu Xijin, the outspoken and often provocative editor of *China's Global Times*, said 'China should open up more channels for criticism and suggestions to encourage constructive criticism' (218). Repnikova believes that if critical voices become more radicalised, we may see 'rising insecurity of the party apparatus about bottom-up threats to its survival, which would in turn lead us to question its adaptive capacity in the long term' (219).

Perhaps, as Brady (2017) suggests, this period will simply prove to be another part of the oscillating cycles of relaxation and contraction (放/收, fang/shou) which a number of authors argue has been the norm in the CCP's approach to political and social control during the reform and opening up era. Brady believes Xi will eventually make another adjustment in governance, allowing the Chinese media more scope once again to be a 'channel for the people to oversee state and societal affairs' (Brady, 2017: 138). Alternatively, Xi's second term may provide a clearer indication as to whether repression is a more effective strategy than adaptation and reform for the Party to avoid the fate of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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