

Problems of *Post-Communism*



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Reconceptualizing the Media

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Despite government attacks, China's newspaper journalists have become increasingly unruly.

ARE journalists in China merely appendages of the party-state? Many researchers seem to think so. On the few occasions that scholars of contentious politics in China have examined the media, it has been in the context of the media's power to shape or suppress contentious behavior by third parties.¹ The conventional view of journalists as part of the party-state, however, is both empirically and conceptually inadequate. Journalists can be, and often are, contentious actors in their own right. This fact leads to two important conclusions. First, and most generally, scholars should broadly reconceptualize the Chinese media to take into account the role of journalists as contentious actors. And second, such behavior by journalists may provide new insight for scholars of contentious politics by highlighting the importance of grievances in sparking collective action. Specifically, the evidence presented here suggests that grievances can inspire action when they—

- Relate to interference with everyday routines (what Snow et al. call “disruption of the quotidian”),²
- Have a specific, visible target or targets, and
- Can be easily framed as a moral rights claim to maximize external support.

Although this article concentrates on the print media,³ the results should be replicable across media types, and the theoretical propositions on grievances and leadership should be easily testable elsewhere.

Contention can take many forms,⁴ and scholars have demonstrated that many systemic factors influence media content,⁵ but this article concentrates on three incidents

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involving Chinese newspapers that fit even the narrowest definition. The incidents were highly visible, clearly intentional, overt acts, as opposed to more debatably contentious acts, such as the publication of unfavorable news or scathing editorials.⁶ The discussion that follows often refers to “the media” as a single entity or group, but this aggregation is merely used for stylistic purposes and should not be construed as implying a seamless, monolithic whole. Indeed, several scholars have pointed out that areas of cultural production outside of “hard” or political news often have much more leeway for action than do the general newspapers detailed below.⁷ The cases presented here therefore represent the most conservative incidents on which to build theory. If such overt phenomena exist even in the most controlled sector of the Chinese media, they certainly exist elsewhere as well.

China’s Changing Media

Some brief historical background is important to understand the momentous changes sweeping the Chinese news media. Before the reform era began in 1979, all media outlets were controlled by the state, the number of media sources was tightly regulated, and outlets such as newspapers were restricted not only in content but even in length and format.⁸ Furthermore, during the Mao era all news providers were funded either directly by the state, indirectly through a policy of forced subscriptions that kept circulation numbers artificially high, or through arrangements whereby organizations agreed to cross-subscribe to each other’s publications.⁹ These mechanisms meant that “the vast majority of the Chinese did not even have the ability to be suspicious of the CCP’s [Chinese Communist Party’s] political system, because they didn’t know that in the outside world a different, worthier life (*geng you jiazhi de shenghuo*) even existed.”¹⁰

Many aspects of the relationship between state and press began to change with Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in the late 1970s. Beijing began to allow increasing commercialization of the media as well as larger numbers of media outlets and types of acceptable content. For example, the number of newspapers alone has risen from 188 in 1980 to more than 1,900 in 2006.¹¹ The number of television stations, radio stations, and satellite broadcasters is increasing proportionally.¹² As the number and content of news access points has increased, so has their financial clout and independence from the government. While Mao-era journalism relied entirely on government funding, today the Chinese news business is market-driven, with advertising revenue rising from zero at the start of the reform era

to \$18 billion in 2005, accounting for nearly 1 percent of China’s gross domestic product.¹³

Economic liberalization has not translated into political freedom, however. Beijing has made clear that it will continue to exercise very tight control over the news media in the short and medium terms, *banning* wayward publications, jailing dissident journalists, and attempting to consolidate control under huge government-run conglomerates.¹⁴ For political journalists at least, the Central Publicity Department (CPD)¹⁵ has engaged in a highly public crackdown throughout President Hu Jintao’s rule, with a number of prominent domestic and even international journalists fired or jailed.¹⁶ The regime has created a generally repressive atmosphere for the Chinese news media, especially for political reporting.¹⁷ And the run-up to the Beijing Olympics has only made the situation more tense for many domestic journalists, with increasing crackdowns on print and on-line content.¹⁸

Studying the News

Previous studies of China’s news media tend to view them in one of two ways—as part of the party-state institutional structure or as an advocate for citizens’ needs.

An Arm of the Party-State. A few scholars of Chinese contentious politics have recognized the inherent importance of the media in their research. Given the tight control the Chinese government routinely exercises over journalists, it is no surprise that these researchers have almost exclusively theorized the news media as a tool of the government. Even Benjamin Liebman, one of the most nuanced scholars and the author of an excellent article on the relationship between the media and contention, writes of the Chinese media as “an arm of the Party-state,” and “one of many competing Party-state institutions seeking to solve problems, expand influence, and force action by others.”¹⁹ The journalist Marlowe Hood notes that “like most societies lacking an independent judiciary and enforceable laws guaranteeing basic rights, China often uses the media to broadcast” stories that help maintain social order.²⁰ Dai Qing, herself a former reporter jailed for her views, goes even further: “In China, the media is [*sic*] regarded as a propaganda tool of the Communist Party. This is in keeping with Mao Zedong’s cardinal doctrine: ‘Revolution depends on two barrels, the barrel of the gun and the barrel of the pen’.”²¹ The strict control the central state maintains over all Chinese news outlets stifles the flow of news about most protests, riots, or potentially destabilizing government actions.²²

A (Potential) Public Champion. The media can thus serve as an important tool of the state in maintaining social order and continued CCP rule, but social-movement scholars have also noted an opposite role, that of public champion. Li and O'Brien argue that "even publication of a single letter or report detailing a case in *People's Daily*, *Legal Daily*, *Township Forum* or *Peasant Daily* can instantly nationalize and legitimize a focus for popular action."²³ And this sort of publication does happen. Although usually tightly controlled at all levels, journalism in China is sometimes responsive to public opinion or mass action. Indeed, one of the founding theoretical principles of journalism in China is that it should reflect "public opinion" (*yulun*) so as to ensure that CCP elites do not become too divorced from the masses. In the 1990s Beijing even periodically campaigned for stronger "supervision by public opinion" (*yulun jian du*) at lower levels of government to ensure conformity with national policy,²⁴ although recently the government has moved away from such encouragement.²⁵

This is more than just talk. One scholar argues that despite the party's desire to keep criticism muted, "Loop-holes do exist that allow editors to diverge somewhat from official lines. Editors may devote more space to public opinion than the propaganda apparatus explicitly approves of."²⁶ In China, however, this sort of intervention by the media is rare, as bold news outlets "that report misconduct by local officials can come under pressure or be subject to editorial reshuffles."²⁷ Often, "The media will intervene only when the villagers try something dramatic or when the tension spirals out of control and attracts the attention of provincial or national leaders," writes Liu Yawei.²⁸ Under the right circumstances, the media in China can make or break a social movement, but the literature has not moved much beyond this revelation.

China's Contentious Journalists

The three cases detailed below are somewhat pared down in order to further a larger series of arguments, heeding Tilly and Tarrow's call: "Instead of trying to explain everything about a contentious episode, close in on its most surprising, interesting or consequential features."²⁹ And what is surprising is that although contentious behavior by journalists is not new in China, the years 2004 and 2005 saw an unprecedented increase in the diversity of such behavior, and signs of resistance have continued since then.³⁰ Moreover, this contention at all levels—from individual to cross-organizational—has taken place despite the current political chill over types of media expression that the CCP deems unfavorable.

China Youth Daily. Among the most prominent examples of such incidents is a series of letters of complaint, "accidentally" leaked onto the Internet, from top *China Youth Daily* reporters to their superiors. The new, CCP-appointed editor-in-chief had announced a plan to tie employees' compensation to how favorably senior officials viewed their articles.³¹ In August 2005 a senior editor wrote an open letter in which he blasted both the plan and the paper's management. In the long and scathing letter, Li Datong writes that the new editor "will enslave and emasculate and vulgarize the *China Youth Daily*." Li adds that he is "not so naive as to think that this is a product of [the editor's] personal will. It goes without saying that [the editor] is an executor."³² Li Datong's letter was not the first of its kind, for in May 2004 the director of news, Lu Yuegang, wrote "An Open Letter to Zhao Yong, Secretary of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Youth League," in which he similarly attacked his bosses at the *China Youth Daily*. In response to repeated attempts to impose more political control over the paper, Lu Yuegang attacks not only these policies, but also Zhao Yong personally in a remarkably harsh tone:

You [Zhao Yong] said before you finished talking that you definitely wanted to have a "heart-to-heart talk" (*tan xin*) with everyone. We also want to have a heart-to-heart talk with you. But what kind of talk will this be? Do you think those of us listening to you grew up eating shit (*shi*)? Do you secretly think that the intellect of your audience is so low that we cannot distinguish between a "heart-to-heart talk" and a "reprimand"? You represented the Youth League Secretariat when you demanded that the leadership ranks of the *China Youth Daily* "strengthen [their] studies [of Communist ideology]," but it is the Youth League Secretariat, and you especially, who need to "strengthen [your] studies" even more.³³

Other employees and editors on the paper worked together to publicize both letters: "We had to move quickly, before they [the CPD] started blocking it," recalled one senior editor" who sent Li Datong's missive out to the Internet.³⁴ This action by *China Youth Daily* staff emphasizes the collective nature of the protest.³⁵

Despite the harshness of their comments, however, neither editor was thrown in jail or removed from his job. Li Datong and Lu Yuegang's personal prominence and the paper's high profile were important reasons why the party moved slowly and deliberately in chastising the two men. Initially, they were not punished. In a brief but powerful form of collective action, other journalists had joined the protest by threatening to strike if Li Datong and Lu Yuegang were disciplined.³⁶ The bold action of the two

