

Participation Under Improvised Control

Maria Repnikova, *Media politics in China*, Princeton University Press

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Despite strict censorship and control, the Chinese party-state and journalists also sometimes interact in a collaborative manner. Constructive investigative reports serve as governance tools to better control local officials and project the image of a responsive government.

Maria Repnikova has studied the interaction between journalists and authorities in China under the mandates of Hu Jintao (2003-2013) and Xi Jinping (2013-). Based on 120 in-depth interviews, her book gives a unique insight into forms of authorized participation in non-electoral systems by investigating the boundaries of critical journalism in China (under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping). Her long-term approach and the comparison undertaken with Russia (under Gorbachev and Putin) valuably put her findings into perspective.

The State of Chinese Critical Journalism

Even though the news industry is still owned and strictly controlled by the state, it has undertaken thorough commercialization and decentralization since the 1980s. The great diversification and competition that ensued has led some outlets to place their hopes of success on providing investigative and critical reports catering for a civic-minded public.

Media and public opinion supervision serve a specific purpose in the system, which needs issues to be exposed in order to respond and adapt to a fast-evolving society. To remain performing and relevant, the Party relies on various feedback mechanisms. In a way reminiscent of Chinese academics, some journalists take responsibility for exposing (fixable) problems and coming up with solutions. The process, relying on worried patriotism and the will to transform the system from within, must be presented as constructive criticism and only works on a case-by-case basis. The advice or criticism is only officially endorsed when it suits the party-state or individual officials' objectives. This selective accountability is rigorously orchestrated as media are presumed to be prone to making mistakes and journalists must invariably signal in their articles that the party is capable of solving the exposed problem, which is presented under as little negative light as possible.

Improvising Policy-Making and Strategic Partnership

Repnikova explains that beyond journalists' structural cautiousness, the frustration of the most liberal ones rarely translates into aspirations towards the adoption of Western democratic models. Wary of chaos and disorder and distrustful of common citizens, their discourse is rather that of good governance. The specificity of Chinese critical journalism is that its main audience is central authorities; and journalists, sometimes playing the role of consultants, tend to "expect a direct response from the state to take note of and to incorporate media supervision in its policy regime" (p. 71). This is the case even if the practice of internal reports directly sent to high officials tends to dwindle, and journalists often choose to raise awareness among the general public so as to put pressure on authorities. The book disaggregates the Party-state and discloses the improvisational "strategic partnership" critical journalists have with the central authorities, often against local authorities which sometimes intimidate, censor and corrupt journalists and lobby higher-level institutions to block them when they lack the power to do so themselves. State control over the media is described as decentralized and adaptive. Journalists can play with inconsistencies and the interests of the central state (and more rarely of local governments) and use the official logic they know well in order to finally get their findings out.

Pre-publication censorship, decentralized and inconsistent as it is, constitutes both a daunting challenge and an opportunity for negotiation and creative publication strategies (microblogging, cross-media collaboration and waiting out). An illustration of the improvisational approach to policy-making Repnikova highlights is the censoring of *Jingji Guangchabao* (The Economic Observer) by Beijing officials before the 18th party congress. Central authorities were quick to perceive the paper's closure as potentially more harmful to the party's image than the daring article it had published. They decided to order the newspaper to reopen.

The Sichuan earthquake of 2008 provides another valuable insight. After a relatively open coverage of the disaster and relief efforts, the multiplication of reports on the insufficient safety in schools and attempts to assess the number of pupils killed in their rubble, Sichuan officials lobbied central and Guangzhou officials for censorship of the famous investigative weekly *Nanfang Zhoumou* (Southern Weekend). This resulted in a "creative compromise" restricting most media investigation, except for the magazine *Caijing*'s, while instrumentalizing media supervision as a governance mechanism to raise school safety standards at the national level and improve their implementation (p. 128). Addressing the immediate issues raised in the report helped project the image of a responsive government. Media revelations and public pressure also compelled the government to turn reconstruction into a widely-praised development miracle.¹

Renewing Authoritarianism Studies

The comparison between the interactions of critical journalists with the Chinese and the Russian states allows Repnikova to contribute to rethink the evaluation of contemporary authoritarian systems and better understand non-electoral forms of political liberalisation. She is dissatisfied with the current literature lumping China together with North Korea as a closed political system, which does not allow to seize a more complex reality. Initiating ambiguous spaces for political participation and incorporating some critical voices does not only provide a façade of transparency to the Chinese regime (admittedly less visible to the outside world than on the Mainland), it constitutes a precious governance tool in the guise of a feedback

¹ According to the World Bank, the Chinese state spent \$16.6 billion on rebuilding public infrastructures in Northern Sichuan, which Christian Sorace showed was however no guarantee of equal success in the whole region.

mechanism and public opinion guidance. Submitted to flexible and creative coercive measures, journalists cannot criticize the state frontally but may collaboratively challenge selective aspects of official misconduct.

Repnikova details the context of the Perestroika to explain the specificities of media policy in Gorbachev's Soviet Union. There, "the media was meant to drive the political and economic reform process and help overcome the institutional gridlock" while in China it has been less about overcoming internal opposition to reform than helping address the ineffective surveillance of local officials after the reform (p. 179). In recent years, Russian journalists have tended to turn against the system they were initially called to transform. No such confrontational reversal took place among Chinese journalists who have continuously identified themselves to patriotic change-makers. Besides, unguarded media liberalization under Gorbachev and the resulting disintegration of the Soviet Union have durably left their mark on Chinese leadership, who has adamantly ensured to remain the driver of media policy. Since the beginning of Xi Jinping's mandate, the official discourse and actual control over the media have even become markedly stricter.

Foraying into Putin's Russia fruitfully illustrates how diverse authoritarian systems can be. Under Putin, critical journalists benefit from less constrained working and publishing conditions. They are however treated as "ineffectual marginal actors" vigorously isolated from the policy-making apparatus. Putin's strategy is to maintain islands of press freedom to construct a more democratic image as these "liberal ghettos" or showcases in fact help authorities avoid rather than enhance accountability.

This book addresses the lament over the tropism of authoritarian studies which tend to "seek to explain its beginning or ending rather than the way authoritarian governments work" (Geddes, 2006, p. 149) despite their prevalence over the course of human history. Repnikova shows that political openings and bottom-up activism coexist in many non-democratic regimes and reminds us that this coexistence is even one of their notable features. In-depth studies like Repnikova's are needed to understand the logic at stake in each specific context. It contributes to a fine-grain understanding of the unique nature of the engagement between critical actors and officials in China.

Maria Repnikova *Media Politics in China*, 2018, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press

Further reading:

- Nolwenn Salmon, “Investigating China. What It Means to Be a Journalist in a Socialist Market Economy”, *Books & Ideas*, 13 December 2011
- Barbara Geddes «Stages of Development in Authoritarian Regimes», in V. Tismaneanu, M. M. Howard, R. Sil (dir.), *World Order after Leninism*, 2006, Seattle/Londres, University of Washington Press.
- Christian Sorace, *Shaken authority. CCP and the 2008 Sichuan earthquake*, 2017, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press.
- Emilie Frenkiel, *Conditional Democracy. The Intellectual Debate on Political Reform in China*, 2015, ECPR press