1 Introduction

Hegemony is 'a relation, not of domination by means of force, but of consent by means of political and ideological leadership. It is the organization of consent'.[1]

A popular depiction of Chinese media in the past decade has been that of a fearful, loyal agent of the ruthless party-state, which exudes no tolerance towards its critics. Indoctrinated to channel official propaganda to the public, silenced by censorship and threatened by coercion, Chinese journalists function in one of the world's toughest places when it comes to media freedom. The few dissidents who are brave enough to challenge China's omnipowerful party apparatus are quickly crushed by it, as manifested by harassment and arrests of activists, widely documented in the Western press.[2] The latest global press freedom assessments rank China at the bottom of their lists, alongside Somalia, Iran and Vietnam.[3]

What goes unnoticed beneath the stark imagery of collision between the mighty state and the fearless, isolated critics, however, is the web of complex negotiations taking place between some Chinese journalists and party officials. Specifically, whereas the majority of Chinese reporting still adheres to the propaganda model, in the past three decades, an exceptional practice of what I term 'critical journalism',[4] including investigative, in-depth, editorial and human-interest coverage of contentious

[1] Roger Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction* (London: ElecBook, 2001): 2.

[2] Most stories in Western media concerning Chinese activists highlight state coercion against them. See, for instance, Scott Neuman, 'Chinese Activist Tells of "Crazy Retaliation" Against His Family', *NPR.org*, 4 July 2014, available at: www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2012/05/10/152412388/chinese-activist-tells-of-crazy-retailiation-against-his-family; Sandra Schulz, 'The Courage of the Few: Dozens Targeted in Chinese Crackdown on Critical Voices', *Spiegel Online*, 20 April 2011, available at: www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-courage-of-the-few-dozens-targeted-in-chinese-crackdown-on-critical-voices-a-758152.html.

[3] Reporters without Borders ranked China 176th out of 180 countries in the 2017 press freedom rankings. https://rsf.org/en/ranking.

[4] While 'investigative journalism' is the most commonly used term for reporting that pushes the boundaries, followed by the concept of 'liberal journalism', which is very loosely defined, the term 'critical journalism' also echoes in other writings on journalism in

societal issues, has emerged in China amid the restrictive environment. Critical journalists comprise a diverse group, with the majority of them based at successful commercial news outlets,[5] but some also working for investigative units of official party outlets, and others contributing individual reports as freelancers and social media commentators. The group includes such different individuals as Miss Xi, a twenty four-year-old Beijinger and recent journalism graduate who has dug into high-level official corruption cases at *Nanfang Dushibao* and *Caixin*, and Mr He, a fifty-year-old Gansu native who never studied journalism but has headed investigative bureaus at the *China Economic Times* and *The Economic Observer*, where he exposed issues ranging from coal mine disasters to improper vaccinations in Shanxi. While their professional pressures, regional bases and personal struggles may differ, what unites these journalists is their pursuit of social justice and their quest to push the envelope of permissible reporting.

Their photographs rarely appear in Western newspapers, as they tend to avoid exposure while carrying out enduring battles within the system. Instead of protesting on the streets, they often gather and share their experiences on university campuses or in the Western-style coffee houses that are mushrooming all over Beijing. You are more likely to find them in

democratic and authoritarian societies. As for democracies, critical journalism parallels scholarly conceptions of journalism 'as an act of critique', as opposed solely to that of communication and culture. See Barbie Zelizer, 'How Communication, Culture, and Critique Intersect in the Study of Journalism', *Communication, Culture & Critique* 1(1) (2008): 86–91. In authoritarian and especially in a Chinese context, the term critical journalism has also been frequently used by scholars analysing media practices that push the boundaries of the permissible. Truex, for instance, in his analysis of Chinese media talks about 'critical media' versus 'official' media. See Rory Truex, 'Who Believes the *People's Daily*? Bias and Trust in Authoritarian Media', paper presented at the Comparative Politics Seminar, University of Pennsylvania, 10 April 2015. Hem refers to the practice of challenging censorship in non-democratic regimes as that of 'critical journalism'. See Mikal Hem, 'Evading the Censors: Critical Journalism in Authoritarian States', Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper, University of Oxford, Trinity Term 2014. Liebman, in his analysis of Chinese media, specifically refers to critical reporting as a new genre that is synonymous with the media's oversight role. See Benjamin L. Liebman, 'Changing Media, Changing Courts', in Susan L. Shirk (ed.), *Changing Media, Changing China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 150–175. Critical journalism is a more inclusive concept than either investigative or liberal-oriented reporting, as it refers to journalists critically engaging with contentious governance issues in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to, the investigative genre. In this book critical journalism is understood to channel an oversight over political governance.

[5] While all Chinese media is still owned by the party-state, many news outlets are partially commercialised, with up to 49 per cent of private ownership in the media being legally allowed by the state. Some scholars categorise Chinese media into 'commercialized', 'semi-commercialized' and 'official' outlets. See Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Media commercialisation is discussed in Chapter 3.

dimly lit Soviet-style lecture halls that resemble meeting rooms of propaganda officials, or in corners of a local Starbucks, than in openly subversive spaces for political critique. While not publicly fighting the regime, these journalists delve into sensitive areas, such as corruption and societal inequality, and provide an alternative framing to that deployed by propaganda journalists on issues of high importance to Chinese citizens. In the past decade alone, they exposed stories such as the 2002 AIDS epidemic in Henan province, the 2003 Sun Zhigang case of a migrant worker illegally detained and beaten to death in Guangzhou,[6] the scandalous school demolitions in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the 2008 milk-poisoning scandal, widespread environmental protests, and food safety crises, among other contentious issues.[7] In most cases, their stories raised a wide public outcry, as manifested in active discussions online, and in some cases they also produced a moderate policy shift.

Given the obsession of the Chinese party-state with maintaining political stability and its deeply entrenched suspicion of liberal media, what motivates it to tolerate critical voices? And considering the high risks associated with probing the system and the meagre chances of changing the political status quo, what drives some journalists to undertake personal and professional risks and engage in critical journalism? Most importantly, how do the key actors – journalists and central officials – manage their delicate relationship and what explains its continuing perseverance? This book is the first sustained attempt at examining the relations between China's critical journalists and the party-state in the past decade (2002–2012) – a period associated with official effort in building a 'harmonious society' amid rising levels of public discontent.[8] Whereas the 1990s are known as the golden age of watchdog journalism in China,[9] the period since 2000 has been more tumultuous for journalist-state relations. As the costs of the fast economic growth of the past two decades began to sink in and give rise to social mobilisation, critical journalism has carried higher risks and opportunities for both the state and media professionals. The tensions, which are already escalating as China continues to strive for a balance between sustained economic growth and political

[6] Sun Zhigang, a young graphic designer from Hubei, was detained and beaten to death by Guangzhou police for not carrying his registration permit. The report by Nanfang Dushibao has sparked widespread public uproar and a legal change whereby all 'custody and repatriation centers' were to be abolished. See 'The Rise of Rights?' *China Digital Times*, May 27, 2005, available at: http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2005/05/rise-of-rights/.

[7] Jingrong Tong, *Investigative Journalism in China: Journalism, Power, and Society* (London: Continuum, 2011).

[8] Mathieu Duchâtel and François Godement, 'China's Politics under Hu Jintao', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 38(3) (2009): 3–11.

[9] Tong, *Investigative Journalism in China*.

stability, make the puzzle of journalist-state relations ever more interesting and timely to examine. In the past three years, under Xi Jinping's leadership, for instance, the coexistence of critical voices and the state is facing new challenges, as manifested in Xi's renewed emphasis on upholding stability and in journalists' persisting push for official accountability, recently demonstrated in courageous investigative reporting of the major chemical explosion in Tianjin.[10]

Beyond correcting popular misconceptions about Chinese media, the pursuit of this book is driven by three overarching intellectual objectives. First, the relationship between critical journalists and the state is an important dimension of Chinese politics on the boundary of the permissible, and thereby can inform us as much about the evolving bottom-up activism as about the modes of adaptation of the Chinese party-state when faced with impending pressures from below. While China's critical journalists constitute a fraction of Chinese media professionals, they are deeply entrenched in the wider network of China's activists, which includes the more contentious non-governmental organisation (NGO) leaders[11] and lawyers,[12] among others who have consistently probed the limits of the regime's tolerance through questioning, criticising and transforming some aspects of governance. At the same time, critical journalists are distinct from other activists or critical actors in a way that makes them theoretically important for analysing the Chinese political system. They carry a heightened political sensitivity for the regime, as they are capable of not only exposing public grievances and governance failures but also of galvanising certain causes and social movements. They can not only provide communication linkages across different activist groups but can also connect these groups with the larger public and empower social movements, especially in the fast-speed age of social media. In the past ten years, the internet has further facilitated the journalists' mediator role, which in turn has arguably spearheaded more contention amongst the Chinese public.[13] Grasping how critical journalists engage with the regime and how the party-state interacts and

[10] For more details on the Tianjin explosion, see 'The Tianjin Explosion', A China File Conversation, 18 August 2015, available at: www.chinafile.com/conversation/tianjin-explosion.

[11] For more details on NGOs, see, for instance, Tony Saich, 'Negotiating the State: The Development of Social Organizations in China', *The China Quarterly* 161 (2000): 124–141; Rachel E. Stern and Kevin O'Brien, 'Politics at the Boundary: Mixed Signals and the Chinese State', *Modern China* 38(2) (2011): 174–198.

[12] For more details on law, see Randall Peerenboom, *China's Long March Toward Rule of Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Neil Jeffrey Diamant, Stanley B. Lubman, and Kevin J. O'Brien, *Engaging the Law in China: State, Society, and Possibilities for Justice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

[13] Steinhardt in his analysis of media coverage of protest events argues how protests have been increasingly covered in a sympathetic way by major Chinese news media over the

responds to these critics, therefore, allows us to map out a more comprehensive picture of 'boundary spanning'[14] activity and the mechanisms behind the regime's persisting adaptability and resilience.

More broadly, the study of critical journalists and the state in China is an account of limited political openings for public participation under authoritarianism – a phenomenon widely examined in comparative authoritarianism literature in the context of elections,[15] but much less so with regard to other channels, such as the media. The media is often treated as one of the variables influencing electoral outcomes,[16] or, when analysed in more detail, it is either portrayed as a democratising force,[17] or, on the opposite, as a tool of public opinion manipulation.[18] What is evident is that media openings are always highly contested spaces under authoritarianism, as regimes regard them with schizophrenic vision, both as potential threats to and as necessary tools for their continuing survival in the interconnected world. The aspiration of this book is to examine these tensions in more depth by stepping beyond the analytical focus on the outcomes of liberalisation versus resilience and illuminating the processes of negotiation and mutual adaptation of different actors involved in contesting these openings. A better grasp of these processes in turn facilitates a deeper understanding of potential risks and opportunities that the presence of some critical journalism, and bounded political openings for participation more broadly, entail for authoritarian regimes.

past decade. He attributes this in part to the internet's reshaping of the Chinese public sphere, but also in part to the deliberate policy on behalf of the Chinese state in allowing for more positive protest coverage. See H. Christoph Steinhardt, 'From Blind Spot to Media Spotlight: Propaganda Policy, Media Activism and the Emergence of Protest Events in the Chinese Public Sphere', *Asian Studies Review* 39(1) (2015): 119–137.

[14] 'Boundary-spanning contention' in China was first defined and introduced by O'Brien. See: Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Neither Transgressive Nor Contained: Boundary-Spanning Contention in China', *Mobilization* 8(1) (2002): 51–64.

[15] For more details on 'electoral authoritarianism', see Yonatan L. Morse, 'The Era of Electoral Authoritarianism', *World Politics* 64(1) (2012): 161–198; Andreas Paul Schedler, *Electoral Authoritarianism* (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006); Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, 'The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy* 13(2) (2002): 51–65.

[16] Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[17] For more details on the importance of media in regime change, see, for instance, Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Natana J. DeLong-Bas, 'The New Social Media and the Arab Spring', *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, available at: www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/Public/focus/essay0611_social_media.html; Sahar Khamis and Katherine Vaughn, 'Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution: How Civic Engagement and Citizen Journalism Tilted the Balance', *Arab Media & Society* 14 (2011), available at: www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=769.

[18] For more details on media as a tool of authoritarians, see, for instance, Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*; Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom (Reprint edition)* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).

By focusing on the case study of media politics in China, moreover, the ulterior objective is to question the conceptual categories of 'hybrid' versus 'full authoritarian' regimes dominating the existing comparative analysis,[19] as will be explained in detail in the following chapter. The China case demonstrates that even those regimes that lack national elections can still combine state control with moderate tolerance of political participation – aspects of which, like the media, can be compared across cases, as demonstrated in the comparison with Russia and the Soviet Union in Chapter 7.

Finally, this book's undertaking is rooted in a motivation to take another step in the direction of de-Westernising media studies[20] by examining the role of media oversight, which is most closely associated with Western liberal democracies, in the radically different and improbable context of China's one-party state. Investigative journalism and critical reporting are largely linked to the notion of the fourth estate and the conception of accountability in democratic systems.[21] The majority of the existing studies on this subject, not surprisingly, are situated in Western contexts.[22] When strides towards non-Western comparisons are made, they tend to be focused on conceptualising and categorising media systems rather than media practices and production processes.[23] Marginalised journalism practices, like critical reporting, often get absorbed into meta-level systemic comparisons. By documenting the micro- and macro-characteristics of critical journalism in China, the analysis presented here not only complements system-level comparisons but also invites more comparative work between Western and non-Western contexts, as well as across non-Western contexts on the

[19] Latest scholarship on authoritarian regimes divides them into those that have elections (termed as 'hybrid' or 'competitive' and 'electoral' authoritarian regimes) and those that don't (termed as 'full' or 'closed' authoritarian regimes). This split and the logic driving it are problematised in the following chapter.

[20] James Curran and Myung-Jin Park, *De-Westernizing Media Studies* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[21] Larry Jay Diamond and Leonardo Morlino, *Assessing the Quality of Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Doris Appel Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics* (Washington, DC: Cq Press, 2009).

[22] See, for instance, David L. Protess and Fay Lomax Cook, *The Journalism of Outrage: Investigative Reporting and Agenda Building in America* (New York: Guilford Press, 1992); Silvio Ricardo Waisbord, *Watchdog Journalism in South America: News, Accountability, and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

[23] Daniel C. Hallin, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press: The Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility and Soviet Communist Concepts of What the Press Should Be and Do* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

dimension of journalistic practices and actors engaged in them, which reside beneath the large and often opaque umbrellas of media systems.

A Fluid Collaboration and Guarded Improvisation

In the past decade, the field of Chinese media studies has undergone a revival, with scholars moving beyond the examination of party institutions responsible for media control towards analysing commercial aspects of media practices,[24] and most recently engaging with multifaceted dynamics of the internet, including online activism,[25] modes of internet management by the regime,[26] and the implications of advances in social media for state-society relations.[27] Although the focus of enquiry has expanded and diversified, the dominant frameworks for engaging with Chinese media have not significantly changed over time. They continue to feature an emphasis either on the party-state tactics or on bottom-up practices, resulting in an analytical dichotomy of control versus resistance.[28] Specifically, whereas one set of scholarly works interrogates censorship, ranging from the study of official directives to experiments with keyword filtering, the other illuminates journalists and netizens' contenstation of control via a myriad of creative practices.[29] This two-sided analysis of Chinese media, which tends to portray the relationship between the state and liberal-minded journalists and netizens as one of perpetual struggle, reflects the dominant approach in the field of Chinese politics more broadly, whereby either a top-down or a bottom-up lens is

[24] Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press); Ying Zhu, *Two Billion Eyes: The Story of China Central Television* (New York: The New Press, 2014); Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics and 'Thought Work' in Reformed China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[25] Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[26] Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts, 'How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression', *American Political Science Review* 107(2) (May 2013): 1–18.

[27] Rebecca MacKinnon, 'China's "Networked Authoritarianism" ', *Journal of Democracy* 22 (2) (2011): 32–46; King, Pan, and Roberts, 'How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression'; Min Jiang, 'Authoritarian Deliberation on Chinese Internet', *Electronic Journal of Communication* 20(3 &4) (2010), available at: www.cios.org/EJCPUBLIC/020/2/020344.html.

[28] An important exception to that is the work by Han on patriotic commentators online that bridges the gap between the contention and control. See Rongbin Han, 'Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China's Fifty-cent Army', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44(2) (2015): 105–134.

[29] Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*; Ashley Esarey and Xiao Qiang, 'Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere: Below the Radar', *Asian Survey* 48(5) (2005): 752–772. On journalists creative practices, see Jonathan Hassid, *China's Unruly Journalists: How Committed Professionals are Changing the People's Republic*, London and New York: Routledge, 2015. Specifically on investigative journalists, see: Tong, Investigative Journalism in China.

employed in delineating the modes of control and resistance, as will be explained in detail in Chapter 2.

This study examines the relationship between critical journalists and the state at both the top-down and the bottom-up levels of analysis, and thereby theorises about the key features of their engagement. In fusing the two perspectives together, this book portrays the relationship between critical journalists and central authorities as a fluid, state-dominated partnership characterised by continuous improvisation. The two actors are analysed as operating within a common political framework and aspiring towards a shared goal – the goal of improving governance. Party officials grant journalists an ambiguous consultative role in the system, and journalists align their own agenda to that of the central state. These actors are capable of maintaining collaborative ties in large part due to the flexible nature of this arrangement, which is defined here as 'guarded improvisation'. Journalists and officials make ad hoc creative adjustments in response to one another, with the state maintaining ample room for modification in endorsing, constraining and responding to watchdog reporting, and with journalists improvising by reinterpreting official policies and working to bypass political restrictions in the haze of dynamic ambiguity. The party-state, however, consistently and carefully guards or leads the direction and the scope of this creative manoeuvring,[30] whereas journalists limit their improvised resistance to 'tactical' strategies undertaken within the structures imposed by the state.[31]

In putting forward this new framework for characterising the relations between critical journalists and the party-state, this study doesn't aim to dismiss the importance of contention, but rather to propose that the overriding tensions should be examined in the larger context of a cooperative umbrella fusing the interests of central and occasionally also local officials with those of critical journalists. The cat and mouse game is vivid, but it is only one facet of their relationship. This book invites scholars of Chinese media to question and unpack the dichotomous categories (i.e. contestation versus control) and to deconstruct the

[30] The notion of the state guarding the direction of state-media relations echoes Cheek's concept of 'directed public sphere' used in conceptualising the relations between Chinese intellectuals and the party. See Timothy Cheek, 'Introductions: The Making and Breaking of the Party-State in China', in Timothy Cheek and Tony Saich (eds.), *New Perspectives on State Socialism in China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997): 7.

[31] The idea of 'tactics' here is borrowed from Certeau's writing, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where he asserts that in our daily routines, such as walking in a city, we can only embark on tactical moves whereas the 'strategies' determining the framework of the city are carried out by structures of power, including institutions and corporations.

fluid partnership between the seemingly adversarial forces as an important step in grasping the nuances of the Chinese media system.

This collaborative dimension is not unique to journalists, and feeds into the scholarly analysis of Chinese intellectuals and other activists as being embedded into the political system.[32] While on the surface having more temptations to embark on open subversion, as they are more readily exposed to global influences in contrast to other Chinese activists, journalists are still deeply entrenched in the system, exhibiting a mix of pragmatism and idealism akin to other contemporary change-makers in China who operate on the fringes of the permissible. Specifically, they acknowledge their role as agents of the central state, take advantage of the loopholes in the political system and avoid issues that immediately challenge or question the party's legitimacy. This notion of symbiotic relations between journalists and officials echoes studies of artists under censorship in socialist contexts that argue that in contrast to the widely perceived antagonism, the censors and their subjects are fused together in an intricate dance of acquiescence.[33]

At the same time, the analysis in this book shows that the persisting embedding of societal actors into the political system and their collaboration with the regime are contingent on unequal power dynamics in favour of the state, and the presence of mutually embraced ambiguity that allows for the relationship to be continuously adjusted and reinvented. As for unequal dynamics, the study of journalists suggests that activists and critical voices continue to occupy the weaker advisory role and remain vulnerable to the shifting political objectives and sensitivities. Though journalists can be the ones sparking the improvised engagement with authorities by outrunning censorship and re-navigating the grey zone, the party-state intensely and meticulously guides their relationship. Throughout, the book illuminates how the party crafts the space for media supervision by framing it as a party-led mechanism in the official discourse and by carefully pre-empting and reacting to journalists' improvised acts both on a routine basis and especially in times of major crisis events.

[32] For more details on intellectuals, see Timothy Cheek, *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge University Press: 2015); for more details on activism, see Peter Ho and Richard Louis Edmonds, *China's Embedded Activism: Opportunities and Constraints of a Social Movement* (Abingdon, NY: Routledge Chapman & Hall, 2008). This dynamic is also not unique to Chinese activists and intellectuals. It echoes writings on relations between artists and intellectuals and the socialist state. In examining Hungarian artists under socialism, for instance, Haraszti writes that 'a new aesthetic culture has emerged in which censors and artists are entangled in a mutual embrace'. See Miklos Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism* (New York: Basic Books, 1987): 5.

[33] Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison*.

As for the importance of ambiguity, the arguments put forward here echo and build on other recent works on 'political ambivalence',[34] 'mixed signals'[35] and 'uncertainty'[36] as characterising China's 'politics at the boundary'.[37] As explained in detail in the following chapter, the framework of 'guarded improvisation' is an attempt at further crystallising the process of this fluid engagement between the state and societal actors. While ambiguity undoubtedly limits activism and especially critical journalism to the narrow grey zones demarcated by the party, it also facilitates its continued existence in a system that prioritises political stability above all. Uncertainty, therefore, should not only be understood as a mechanism of control via self-censorship, as already widely documented in other works, but also as an enabling condition for limited forms of activism to coexist with an authoritarian system.

The book further demonstrates that the fluid partnership between journalists and officials appears to be rooted in 'fragmented',[38] 'consultative'[39] and 'adaptive'[40] features of China's political system. As for the fragmented feature, fluid collaboration is in part a product of the decentralised nature of China's political system, which has long been conceptualised as that of 'fragmented authoritarianism',[41] displaying significant gaps between central-level initiatives and their local-level implementation. These gaps create opportunities for alliances to form between central authorities and societal actors, including critical journalists, that target policy gridlocks and governance failures at the local level. Local officials, as demonstrated in the following chapters, often serve as the common target of journalists and central authorities. At the same time, decentralised policy-making inspires opportunistic behaviour on

[34] Rachel Stern, *Environmental Litigation in China: A Study in Political Ambivalence* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[35] Rachel E. Stern and Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Politics at the Boundary: Mixed Signals and the Chinese State', *Modern China* 38(2) (1 March 2012): 174–198.
[36] Jonathan Hassid, 'Controlling the Chinese Media: An Uncertain Business', *Asian Survey* 48(3) (2008): 414–430.
[37] Stern and O'Brien, 'Politics at the Boundary Mixed Signals and the Chinese State'.
[38] Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Andrew Mertha, ' "Fragmented Authoritarianism" 2.0: Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process', *The China Quarterly* 200 (2009): 995–1012.
[39] Jessica C. Teets, 'Let Many Civil Societies Bloom: The Rise of Consultative Authoritarianism in China', *The China Quarterly* 213 (2013): 19–38.
[40] Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2011).
[41] Lieberthal and Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China*; Mertha, '"Fragmented Authoritarianism" 2.0'.

behalf of local officials, who attempt to safeguard their interests by applying pressures on the centre and on individual reporters to halt and mitigate negative coverage. Whereas in the realm of economic policy-making, experimentation has been noted as an important by-product of fragmented governance,[42] when it comes to media and social activism, this book suggests that improvisation is a more fitting term, as it captures the less structured and the more dynamic modes of negotiating political boundaries.

Journalist-state relations are also a manifestation of a fusion of China's consultative and adaptive features, whereby limited public feedback is incorporated into policy-making, while flexibility is prioritised in most dimensions of decision-making and policy implementation. In fact, the analysis of journalists demonstrates how these two parallel but seemingly disparate modes of governance work to reinforce each other in the Chinese context. As the next chapter theorises in more detail, bounded consultations can facilitate the adaptability of the party-state, as they invite prompt adjustments of state policies in accordance with public preferences and help enforce top-down accountability, while a flexible mode of carrying out these consultations is what makes them tolerable to the regime in the first place, as authorities can bend their responses while maintaining a grip on political stability.

Beyond highlighting the persisting characteristics of China's activism and political governance, the analysis of China's critical journalists further links the China case to comparative studies on participatory channels under authoritarianism, offering new ways of understanding this phenomenon. By highlighting the potential for societal actors to shape authoritarian governance in a constructive manner, even if not managing nor intending to pave the way for a democratic transition, this book shows that state-sanctioned openings for political participation can serve different governance purposes, such as those of feedback and accountability channels, beyond destabilising or superficially enhancing a ruling regime. As this account of China's critical journalists demonstrates, the relationship between critical actors and the state under authoritarian rule can embody flexible collaboration, not only the state domination or high contention portrayed in the existing literature.[43]

[42] Sebastian Heilmann, 'Policy Experimentation in China's Economic Rise', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 43(1) (2008): 1–26.

[43] Comparative authoritarianism scholarship examines this issue from the top-down perspective focusing either on the incentives and tactics of the regime in containing any dissent or on the most contentious segments of society aiming for breaking the system. The subtler within-the-system activism has been given little attention in the literature. This is explained in more detail in the next chapter.

The Approach and Sources

The book approaches the dynamic puzzle of critical journalism in four parts: conceptual and theoretical frameworks, the key parameters of journalist-state relations in China, case studies of crisis events, and comparative dimensions of state-media relations in Russia and the Soviet Union and of media politics in the Xi Jinping era. The first part of the book which encompasses this introductory chapter and the following theoretical discussion, unpacks the conceptual framework of a fluid partnership and guarded improvisation and explains the theoretical pay-offs of this study for the scholarship on Chinese society, political governance and comparative authoritarianism.

The second part introduces the overarching objectives for media oversight held by central party officials and critical journalists (Chapter 3), followed by the analysis of routine constraints on their relationship, as experienced by practising journalists and editors (Chapter 4). Chapter 3 discusses the notion of a fluid collaboration between critical journalists and the party-state as being rooted in their shared vision of media oversight – a vision that is overshadowed by ambiguity but nonetheless frames critical journalism as a channel for improving the party's governance, mainly at the local level. Chapter 4, illuminates day-to-day improvised interactions between journalists and media-regulating officials through journalists' accounts of political pressures, ranging from pre-publication censorship and withholding of information by authorities to post-publication censorship and coercive punishments.

The third part of the book investigates how the terrain that binds these actors shifts during national-level crisis events.[44] Chapters 5 and 6, expose the reader to the evolving relationship between journalists and officials as it comes under significant pressure. In times of crisis, the party-state is torn between using the media for two somewhat contradictory purposes: propaganda and public feedback. On the one hand, the authorities are driven to shape public opinion through the media, while, on the other, they rely on the media for accurate and objective reporting in order to effectively manage a crisis and pre-empt public discontent. Chinese journalists, in turn, find themselves in an equally precarious position during crisis events, as they come under severe guidance from the state while striving to deliver timely and objective coverage of complex and emotionally-charged events. These mutual challenges experienced by journalists and officials are not unique to China or to authoritarian

[44] Crisis events encompass three predominant features: threat, uncertainty and urgency. See Arjen Boin, Eric Stern and Bengt Sundelius, *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership Under Pressure* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

contexts. Even in democracies, media plays diverse roles in times of emergency, including that of information provision and investigation, and governments often attempt to set media agenda. In China, these dynamics are amplified. Up until the early 2000s, no major reporting on disasters was tolerated as it was deemed to be potentially destabilising. Historically, major disasters in China were regarded as premonitions of the weakening power of the state or as signs of forthcoming political transformations.[45] To this day, the regime regards them with acute sensitivity, yet it now realises that in the age of social media and globalisation, a complete cover-up is impossible and unfavourable, and a more nuanced treatment of disaster coverage is in order.

The two crises examined here are the Sichuan earthquake (Chapter 5) and repetitive major coal-mining accidents (Chapter 6).[46] The Sichuan earthquake (also named the Wenchuan earthquake after its epicentre) was the deadliest natural catastrophe to affect China in the past decade,[47] with the death of over 5,000 children in poorly constructed schools eliciting wide public scrutiny. Coal-mining safety has been a continuous challenge for the Chinese state throughout the reform era,[48] turning into a national scandal and getting at the forefront of high-level policy discussions by the mid-2000s.[49] By intentionally selecting two different types of disasters, with the earthquake inciting an unexpected, immediate and large-scale exogenous shock to the system, and the coal-mining accidents presenting the cumulative effect of continuous governance failures, this book traces some variation in potentially destabilising political effects and the subsequent interactions between journalists and the state during and in the aftermath of major crises.

The concluding part of this book takes a step in a comparative direction by drawing contrasts across authoritarian cases (Chapter 7) as well as between Hu and Xi periods (Chapter 8). Chapter 7 compares the China case to two contrasting cases of journalist-state relations in the late Soviet Union under Gorbachev and in the Russian Federation under Putin.

[45] Gerard Lemos, *The End of the Chinese Dream: Why Chinese People Fear the Future* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

[46] The analysis includes all major accidents that occurred under the Hu-Wen leadership with fatalities of thirty and higher. For more details, see Table 6.2.

[47] According to the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, the Sichuan earthquake led to 68,858 deaths (and 18,618 people missing) and economic losses of 85 billion dollars (Femke Vos et al., 'Annual Disaster Statistical Review 2008: The Numbers and Trends', Belgium Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, 2009).

[48] Olivia Lang, 'The Dangers of Mining around the World', *BBC News*, 14 October 2010, available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-11533349.

[49] Wang Shaoguang, 'Regulating Deaths at Coalmines: Changing Mode of Governance', *Journal of Contemporary China* 15(46) (2006): 1–30.

The former is the case of critical journalists playing a democratising role, contributing to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, and the latter is the case of them coexisting with the regime but having a highly subdued and marginalised position in the political system. These comparative contexts reflect the two common ways of analysing limited political openings under authoritarianism, introduced earlier, with critical actors either being involved in a contentious battle with the state or being manipulated by the regime into serving an image-boosting function. This chapter demonstrates how the fluid collaboration framework and the variables of shared objectives and guarded improvisation help explain the divergent relations between critical journalists and the state in other authoritarian contexts. Beyond its theoretical significance in linking the analysis of China to the wider comparative universe of non-democracies, this chapter illuminates both an anti-model of China's approach to managing the media – that of the Gorbachev leadership—as well as the new potential model for managing critical voices under authoritarianism—in the form of Putin's leadership. In the past several years, under Xi's rule, the Chinese party-state has revived the study of the Gorbachev example to avoid similar mistakes and disastrous consequences,[50] while closely observing Putin's mode of governing, and in some ways adapting his personalistic features. Chapter 8 concludes the book by revisiting the key arguments and reassessing them in the context of recent changes in media and state-society relations under President Xi. It introduces the latest shifts, and further explains the continuities in journalist-state relations, the flaring of recent tensions, and what the evolving practice of media oversight tells us about China's consultative governance, varieties of authoritarianism and comparability of media oversight role across political spectrums.

The sensitivity of the subject of this book made for a challenging process of data gathering, involving twelve months of fieldwork with multiple trips to Beijing from 2008 to 2016, as well as a research trip to Moscow in April 2010. A total of 120 semi-structured interviews were carried out with media practitioners, media and crisis management experts, and party and state officials, lasting from one hour to an entire day. Interviews were secured through a web of introductions, otherwise known as the snowball technique, with initial interviewees helping arrange additional meetings with their colleagues. All interviews

[50] For more details on the Chinese party-state learning from Gorbachev's 'failures', see Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham, MD; Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

were conducted by the author in Chinese and Russian. The anonymity of respondents was ensured by carefully concealing their names throughout the research and the writing process. Some follow-up interviews and informal conversations that inform the concluding part of the book were also conducted via Skype and e-mail correspondence in 2014 and 2015, as well as in person, in the summer of 2016. For the list of guiding interview questions and interviewees, please refer to Appendix B.

Media practitioners, including reporters and editors, who make up the majority of the interviewees, were selected primarily from the outlets nationally renowned for investigative and in-depth reporting on contentious societal issues,[51] ranging from the more commercial outlets like *Nanfang Zhoumo*, *Nanfang Renwu Zhoukan*, *Nanfang Dushibao*, *Caijing* and *Caixin*, to investigative units of official outlets such as that of *Jingji Guanchabao*, *Bingdian* of *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao* and the *Xinwen Diaocha* programme of China Central Television (CCTV). The analysis also draws on interviews with investigative journalists and op-ed editors at popular mainstream outlets, such as *Xinjing Bao*, freelance journalists who write for established outlets and online platforms, such as *Bolian* and most recently, Sohu and Tencent; as well as retired investigative journalists. In addition, interviews with editors at some official outlets, such as *Huanqiu Shibao* and Xinhua News Agency, were conducted for a contrasting perspective. In Moscow, interviewees included editors and journalists at nationally reputable investigative outlets, including *Novaya Gazeta*, *The New Times*, *Agentura.ru*, *Vlast'* magazine and the editorial section of *Vedomosti* business newspaper. The author has also interacted with retired journalists who were active in the *glasnost* era. In selecting interviewees, the author has largely opted for journalists from established news outlets as opposed to citizen journalists because in-depth reporting in China is still carried out primarily by news outlets, with social media being largely forbidden from embarking on independent investigations.[52] Moreover, focusing on established news outlets has helped to illuminate the evolution of the interaction of critical voices and the party-state over a longer time frame, and to contrast journalists' perceptions with their published writings, which enriches the data and the analysis. At the same time, this study is by no means a synthesis of the workings of the press, but

[51] In categorising the outlets, the author relied on secondary literature on Chinese journalism, as well as on preliminary fieldwork carried out in China as part of my master's thesis in 2007–2008, which involved interviews with Chinese media experts and educators closely watching the developments of Chinese media, including critical reporting.

[52] Interviews MNG02; COF01; CSE02. These trends are shifting somewhat under Xi, with some platforms like Tencent publishing and carrying out independent investigative reporting. This is explained in more detail in the Conclusion of this book.

rather it sits at the crossroads of new and traditional media, as the boundaries between the two are increasingly evaporating, with print media actively transitioning to online platforms and well-known newspaper journalists turning into popular online public opinion makers with the help of social media platforms like Weibo and Weixin. It is apparent in this research that the majority of critical reports are read in an online edition, rather than in print, and commercial and official news outlets alike are aggressively adapting to digital audiences. A number of media professionals analysed in this study also have a large individual online following. Hu Shuli, the current editor of *Caixin* magazine, previously at *Caijing*, for instance,[53] has two million followers on Weibo, and Luo Changpin, the former editor of *Caijing* has 680,000 followers.[54] Not all media personalities are this popular amongst the general public, but the gatekeepers of critical publications tend to exert significant influence on online public opinion in sharing their reports, as well as their opinions on current events. The personalised sharing, however, tends to be limited, as explained further in Chapter 4. Throughout this book, the analysis of critical journalists is fused with the discussion of social media, and its interactive effects on the evolution of investigative reporting are explained in detail.

The book further draws on rare encounters with Chinese officials in charge of media regulation at the central level, including high-ranking employees at China's General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP, *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Xinwen Chuban Zongshu*, 中华人民共和国新闻出版总署) and the Central Propaganda Department (CPD, *zhongyang xuanchuan bu*, 中央宣传部),[55] as well as officials in charge of overseeing mining safety at the State Council. Some interviews were followed up with e-mail correspondence, and a number of conversations were carried out with the same officials over an extensive period (four years). Since the motivation of this book was to sketch a framework of journalist-state relations at the national level, interviews with officials are biased in favour of the centre. The objectives of local officials, however, are richly documented in the study, as they are weaved into the interviews with journalists and central officials, and present an important part of the story.[56]

[53] Hu Shuli left *Caijing* in 2009 and took her top editorial team with her to start another magazine, *Caixin*. Ian Johnson and Sky Canaves, 'Leading Editor Quits China's Top Magazine', *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 November, 2009, available at: www.wsj.com/articles/SB125775561968037983.

[54] These numbers are based on the latest search on Weibo.

[55] It was officially renamed in English as the Publicity Department.

[56] For an in-depth analysis of journalist-state dynamics at the local level, see Wanning Sun and Jenny Chio (eds.), *Mapping China: Region, Province, Locality* (London: Routledge, 2012).

Finally, the perspectives of well-known media and crisis management experts, as well as representatives of media development NGOs, greatly enrich the analysis and complement the discussions with journalists and officials. The scholars and experts interviewed are based at Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing University, Renmin University, China Communications University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the School of Government at Nankai University, as well as at commercial firms involved in training officials in communication techniques. Many of these experts provide media training to officials at the central and local levels, and carry out research directly linked to the questions at the heart of this study, including the opportunities and limitations for media oversight in China and the state's evolving approaches to crisis management. A global practitioner perspective is also fused into the analysis through conversations with the director and other employees of the International Centre for Communication Development (ICCD), a Beijing-based international organisation that has led extensive journalism training workshops in China on issues ranging from media ethics to environmental journalism,[57] and through attendance of a number of events and conferences co-sponsored by foreign embassies and Chinese universities on the topic of journalism and media governance. In Moscow, expert interviewees include those based at the Moscow Carnegie Center, Moscow State University and the Glasnost Foundation, as well as independent commentators and activists involved in advancing critical media agenda.

In-depth interviews are complemented by a close textual analysis of the official discourse on the media (Chapter 3), as well as of investigative and in-depth coverage of selected crisis events (Chapters 5 and 6). The former involves a careful study of selected articles in *Qiushi*, a fortnightly magazine managed by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and renowned for representing policy statements and carrying official discourse. The latter includes the examination of crisis coverage by two different nationally reputable investigative outlets: *Nanfang Zhoumo* and *Caijing*.[58] The analysis of writings of officials and journalists distills different discourse strategies employed by the two actors, as well as the key frames used in discussing media oversight (in the case of officials) and in formulating critical comments (in the case of journalists).

[57] For more details, see www.iccd.biz/temp/about.html. It is the same organisation that represents the Internews branch in China.

[58] A wider analysis of media reports by a range of critical outlets discussed in the previous section is performed beforehand to determine the scope of investigative coverage. The author then proceeds with a detailed textual analysis of the coverage in the two outlets.

This linguistic component presents a rare attempt at in-depth qualitative study of discourse concerning sensitive issues and subtle contested meanings in the Chinese context.[59] It enriches and diversifies interview analysis, as it further interrogates the concepts and ideas discussed by the interviewees, and demonstrates some of their practical manifestations, especially in the case of journalists' reporting on sensitive issues.

In the past six years of carrying out the research for this book, the author has benefitted tremendously from long-standing relationships with generous Chinese and Russian colleagues, who have not only accepted interview requests, highlighted the appropriate media sources and shared their contacts but also have allowed for observing journalism classes, media training workshops, public lectures, as well as participating in private gatherings at their homes and in public spaces. When not referring to a specific interview or media analysis, this book draws on many observations collected over the course of these interactions. The attendance of several annual investigative journalism conferences (*yulun jiandu huiyi*) was particularly meaningful for this research, as the conference gathered critical journalists and editors from across the country and engaged with different facets of journalists' work on the boundaries of the permissible, including their perceptions of restrictions, negotiation tactics and general understanding of the nature of media oversight in China. Informal meetings and presentations at the Moscow Carnegie Center have also facilitated unique exposure to different voices in the Russian media community. This book attempts to fuse this multifaceted exposure on the ground with critical analysis of primary sources and theoretical and comparative thinking on Chinese governance and authoritarian regimes.

[59] Content analysis has been a more popular technique for analysing discourse, especially when it comes to media reports in China. While undoubtedly useful for gauging the larger trends and processing big data, overreliance on content analysis risks missing or confusing the more subtle meanings. When it comes to expressing criticism in an authoritarian system or to advocating for a contentious policy of media oversight, the discourse is ridden with ambiguity that requires more in-depth, qualitative study.