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Topical Issue: Stability Maintenance and Chinese Media
Guest Editors: Jonathan Hassid and Wanning Sun

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Stability Maintenance and Chinese Media: Beyond Political Communication?

Jonathan HASSID and Wanning SUN

For political scientists, Chinese media practices and communication systems provide an enduring prism through which to understand how Chinese politics work. By contrast, for media and communication scholars, politics is one of the main domains in which various media and communication forms, practices and policies can be fruitfully explored. While political scientists and media scholars share this common interest, they tend to pursue different research agendas, adopt different methods of data-gathering and analysis, and at times seem to speak a different language. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that political scientists and media scholars may even have different understandings of what constitutes valid empirical data or worthy lines of inquiry and which theoretical models and paradigms are fashionable or out of date. Because of this divide, the two groups of scholars unearth different findings and reach different conclusions. This leads to the curious situation in which scholars of the same field – but in different disciplines – talk past each other, or worse still, look upon each other's work with deep suspicion.

While gulfs understandably exist across disciplinary boundaries, they are, to a great extent, avoidable. In fact, collaboration between the disciplines of anthropology and media studies has provided some shining examples of cross-fertilization bearing intellectual fruit (e.g. Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002). And there are signs that as the Chinese media are becoming increasingly regionalized and localized, it is becoming possible to explore the analytic perspectives developed in the field of geography to make sense of the new developments in scale, place and space (Sun and Chio 2012). Given this fruitful collaboration, there are certain to be advantages in exploring dialogue between political scientists and media scholars.

So where do the two fields differ? Political scientists see the Chinese media as just one aspect – albeit an important one – of China's political system; for communications scholars, the focus is on the media itself and how it is nestled within the Chinese economy and society (Keane and Sun 2013). This differing emphasis determines which areas the two camps tend to investigate. Political scientists,

inclined toward investigating state–society relations and the loci of power, often focus on state control and media resistance. This focus in turn shapes what questions are asked, what data are gathered and what methods are used. For example, political scientists' recent spate of studies on the emerging electronic media (including special issues in *Political Communication* [2011], *China Quarterly* [2011] and the *Journal of Communication* [2012]) generally adopt a "cat and mouse" frame to investigate the tensions between the party-state's desire for control and the efforts of a few select netizens to circumvent that control. With this approach, political scientists see the media as a potential check on arbitrary state power, often adopting the normative underlying assumption that the media can serve as a relatively neutral "fourth estate" (Keane and Sun 2013).

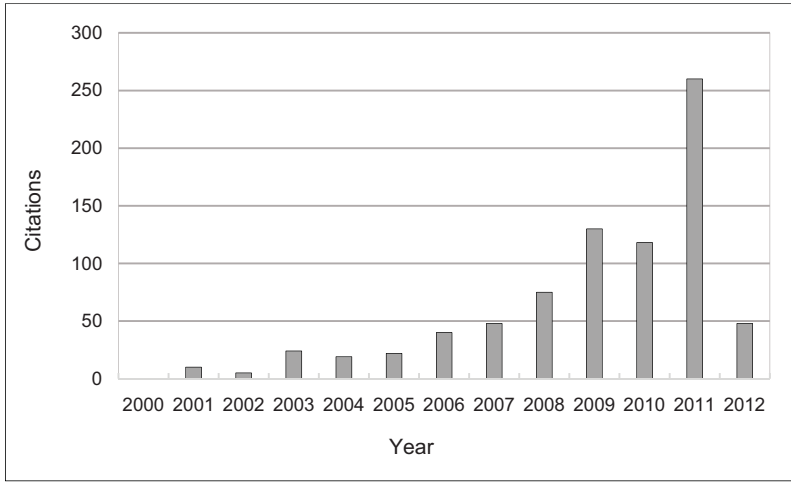
Media and communication scholars concerned with political communication are equally interested in the question of the power, behaviour and impact of the party-state, but the object of their analysis is generally not politics *per se*. Rather, communications scholars focus on the assemblage of institutional practices, technologies, money, media texts, practitioners and consumers, and how particular arrangements of these elements shape the media power structure and ultimately the meaning of political messages. But there is a further internal division of labour within media studies: political economists "follow the money" through funding arrangements, ownership, ratings and regulation, while critical media and cultural scholars trace power (in the Foucauldian sense) through a dialectical relationship between the "culture of production" and "production of culture". Rather than focusing on propaganda and control, media and communications scholars are more concerned with the quotidian nature and cultural practice of media production and the socialization and (de)politicization of individuals through media consumption.

Most media scholars tend to shy away from adopting a control-vs.-resistance lens. In fact, cultural studies as a discipline seems to have long reached a consensus that since there is no control that is total and no resistance that is complete, it may make more sense to talk about the effects of the media on supporting or fracturing ideology and hegemony. Media scholars are just as interested as political scientists in the possibilities of new media and technologies, but the former largely focus on the ways in which these new tools are used to serve political and social ends.

Since there is a plethora of media forms (including journalism, entertainment, service information and advertising), media scholars are cautious about ascribing behaviour to the media in general (for example, referring to "the media", "journalists", and so on). Similarly, this critical lens is not limited to looking at the news, the public sphere, political blogs or *weibo* discussion topics – as political scientists tend to do – for clues of change or continuity in political communication practices. Instead, media scholars tend to look for hidden ideological – rather than overtly political – messages, and are committed to showing that the seemingly apolitical are often in fact deeply ideological. Put simply, while political scientists look for evidence of political control and political resistance, media scholars engage in finding traces of depoliticization.

These differences are manifest in how scholars from both disciplines interact with and cite each other. A search for "Chinese media" as a topic in the ISI Web of Knowledge, for example, reveals 333 articles published between 2000 and early 2012, with the number rising steadily – almost exponentially – in recent years.

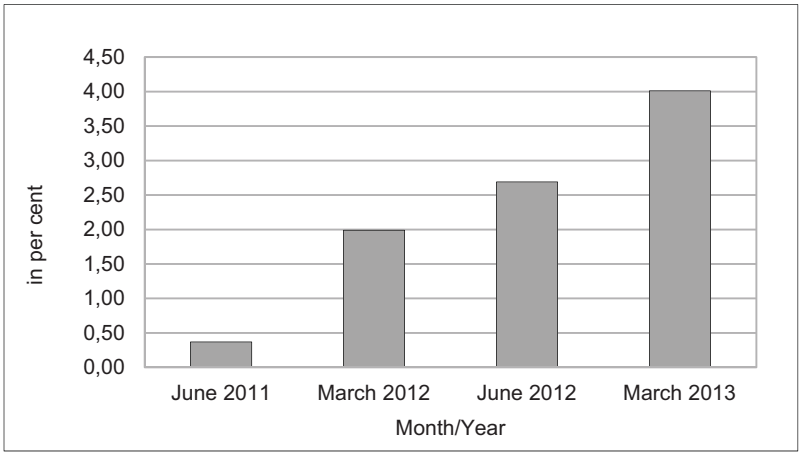
Figure 1: Articles on the Chinese Media



Note: 2012 articles represent only the first part of the year.
Source: ISI Web of Science (numbers are approximate).

These 333 articles, not surprisingly, are mostly divided between communication and political science, with sociology a distant third. Allowing for the fact that an individual paper can fall into multiple categories, approximately two-thirds of these papers are communication-based, and another quarter are based in political science. But apart from some early, groundbreaking articles that are cited in roughly this ratio, the citation pattern does not follow this disciplinary breakdown. Political scientists, in particular, seem to ignore most communications papers, as only 12 per cent of the 599 papers that cited these 333 are in political science, compared with nearly 50 per cent in communication. The evidence suggests, in other words, that the disciplinary boundaries are hardening.

Figure 2: Citations of Articles on the Chinese Media



Note: 2012 citations represent only the first part of the year.
Source: ISI Web of Science (numbers are approximate).

Why do these data necessarily indicate a problem? What is the risk in continuing to live in parallel universes? On the one hand, while the political scientists' focus on authoritarian control, dissent and resistance is warranted – China is, after all, an authoritarian regime ruled by the Communist Party – it is increasingly risky to regard China as an exceptional case and to focus more or less exclusively on what makes it an "exception". Colin Sparks (2012), a leading media

studies scholar, has recently urged a move "beyond political communication" towards a "broader perspective" on the Chinese press. Sparks argues that contemporary China bears little resemblance to the classic model of totalitarianism and that there is much more to talk about regarding the Chinese media than just how far journalists can push the boundaries. Political science's narrow approach risks missing important developments outside the overtly political realm that nevertheless can have a broad impact on China's society and politics.

On the other hand, a weakness in much of the media studies scholarship lies in its lack of both critical language and empirical commitment regarding accounting for the impact of the party-state in the production, shaping and interpretation of media content. Zhao Yuezhi (2008), a political economist of Chinese media and communication, conceptualizes the Chinese state as "a contradictory entity and as a site of struggle between competing bureaucratic interests, divergent social forces and different visions of Chinese modernity" (Zhao 2008: 11). Much of this contradiction and complexity is illustrated in her analysis of the economics of the Chinese media, media policy and regulations, and the production of media content (Zhao 2008). However, in a large proportion of research on Chinese media practices, especially in the analysis of popular cultural expressions and entertainment media content, the question of if and how the state functions receives scant consideration. In China, even entertainment options are subtly shaped by party-state intervention, and when media scholars elide China's political environment they risk missing a critical part of the picture. This is particularly so in the post-Mao context, where the adoption of a neoliberal logic is shown to have enriched and strengthened China's authoritarian rule, calling for investigation into how the

> state and the private sphere, government and individuals are engaged in co-production of practices, values, solutions that usually do not have a liberal democratic outcome (Ong and Zhang 2008: 10).

Scholars of the Chinese media often have differing underlying conceptions of the Chinese political system. One school of thought sees the state – "forged in the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist social revolution, with a historically grounded popular base of legitimacy" (Zhao 2008: 177) – as being relatively secure and unwilling to implement systemic political change. Others are more sanguine about the

potential for democratic changes (at least around the margins) while recognizing that the Chinese party-state remains authoritarian and dependent on the propaganda system to maintain its power and legitimacy (e.g. Brady 2008). Both schools, however, are grounded in a historical perspective that builds upon earlier seminal work by scholars like Franz Schurmann (1971), Stuart Schram (1984) and Michael Schoenhals (1992).

Despite this shared commitment to the Chinese media's historical background and trajectory, the disciplinary origins of political science and media studies are an important cause of their divergent focus and approach. Political science as a modern discipline arose in the United States in the late nineteenth century, a product of the Progressive Era's fascination with measuring and quantifying social change. At first concerned primarily with deriving "universal laws", with the start of the Cold War the discipline began to draw more heavily on "area studies" to gain insight into the rest of the world. Even though the field of "China studies" is now populated with Chinese-born as well as Western scholars, its paradigm developed in a particularly Western framework of approaching China first and foremost as a communist, authoritarian regime. Political scientists are interested in the Chinese media and its communication system in part because they offer fertile ground to examine the potential emergence of civil society, the public sphere and democratization. For media scholars, this agenda represents a narrow-minded fixation on topics that have not changed in 30 years despite tectonic shifts in China's underlying media landscape. The reluctance to acknowledge important changes outside political scientists' worldview is exacerbated by a fetish for measuring and counting that strikes many media scholars as misguided or worse.

By contrast, the discipline of media studies, now also inhabited by China-born as well as Western academics, has attracted students from the general field of media studies instead of "China studies". These scholars stand to inherit political communication's more "universal" set of research paradigms, but for many political scientists, this approach risks devolving into a theory-laden exercise in triviality. Topics that are important for media scholars – questions of subjectivity, discourse, identity construction and so on – are seen as "fuzzy": imprecise at best and incomprehensible at worst. At the same time, an overwhelming focus on "universal" theory risks building a Pro-

crustean bed which forces China's empirical realities into an ill-fitting theoretical framework.

The scope of this topical issue is not overly ambitious. We do not claim to be able to illuminate the blind spots of both disciplines, nor we do believe that paradigms, perspectives and approaches formed over decades can be shifted overnight. What we do hope to do, instead, is to create a space whereby scholars from both disciplines can address the same empirical issue. In doing so, we hope contributors will reveal differences and similarities in the ways in which they conceptualize, frame and approach media and communication. The point of departure for this exercise is that students of Chinese media and political communications from different disciplines share a wide range of common concerns, so they may want to avoid the scenario of existing in parallel universes and start becoming more aware of each other's different languages, methods and research agendas. At best, readers end up having an enriched, more nuanced perspective of the Chinese media and political communication. At worst, readers at least become aware that there is more than one way to research the Chinese media.

We have identified "stability maintenance" (维稳, *weiwen*) as the most enduring and salient theme in understanding the political communication in China. The late paramount Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping famously argued that "stability trumps all" (稳定压倒一切, *wending yadao yiqie*), and an obsession with maintaining social stability continues to drive the contemporary CCP. The current regime led by Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang is no exception. It is reported that the PRC now spends tens of billions of dollars on *weiwen* – more, indeed, than on external defence (Tsinghua University 2010). Given the importance of *weiwen* to the CCP, officials use all available resources, from overt state oppression to subtle cultural manipulation, to maintain their goals. Having become both the means and the end, stability – or the threat of instability – has provided justification for oppression, censorship and media inaction. *Weiwen* has taken on a life of its own; it is now an assemblage of discourses, policies, processes and institutions.

Media control, unsurprisingly, is near the top of the agenda. One development of note is what David Bandurski at the University of Hong Kong's China Media Project calls "control 2.0". This strategy involves active manipulation of media and cultural messages to en-

sure that the CCP stays ahead of and helps shape brewing storms; this strategy is proactive rather than reactive. Considering the wide scope of its activities and effects on the media, *weiwen* – including subtle techniques like "control 2.0" – is an important topic for both media scholars and political scientists. For the latter, *weiwen* provides an important window into the party-state's structure, power and concerns. Media and communications scholars, in turn, can examine how the CCP obsession with *weiwen* affects popular rhetoric and consciousness.

Papers and Themes

Our contributors address and speak to the theme of stability maintenance and Chinese media and communication. The list of questions below, while not exhaustive, is intended to be indicative of a range of concerns:

- What issues, phenomena and topics in Chinese politics and society support the party-state's means and goals of stability maintenance?
- What is the role of the Chinese media and communication system in maintaining stability?
- What media and communication policies, processes and practices are implemented to maintain stability?
- What aspects of the Chinese media present themselves as important and relevant prisms through which to explore stability maintenance?
- What kind of model, paradigm, research agenda or approach is most useful and effective in addressing the issue of *weiwen*?
- How does the CCP's emphasis on *weiwen* affect media and communication in China?

Among the four contributors to this topical issue, two (Sun and Hassid) take a big-picture approach and two (Esarey and Han) zoom in on the language and motivations of particular individuals. While the scope of all four pieces differs, all authors are careful to draw links between particular regulations or individual actions and the stability of the Chinese political system as a whole. They work well together to remind both political scientists and communications scholars of the increasing – and often overlooked – importance that ostensibly apol-

itical media content has in helping the CCP maintain power. As such, these contributions point the way toward future collaborative work and help nudge Chinese media scholarship beyond its disciplinary bailiwicks.

Wanning Sun's contribution, "From Poisonous Weeds to Endangered Species: *Shenghuo* TV, Media Ecology and Stability Maintenance", is intended to set the scene for this topical issue on stability maintenance and media by providing a general context in which the three more empirically based papers are situated. Taking an unorthodox – even somewhat provocative – approach, she argues that media and communication in China can be looked at as an ideological-ecological system. More specifically, she suggests that by exploring the complex relationship and interaction between various media forms, genres and practices in the Chinese media and communication sector, we can arrive at a more nuanced and precise understanding of the relationship between China's media practices and its ongoing objectives for stability maintenance. She concentrates not on the usual dichotomy of control and resistance but instead theorizes that the media as a whole, and especially the mundane, seemingly "apolitical" media, work toward maintaining equilibrium in the system. Her work sees areas of the media like lifestyle advice and consumer information as having "done more for stability maintenance and the party-state's political legitimacy than have news and entertainment" by virtue of their ubiquity and apparent trustworthiness. As such, she brings needed attention to this area and argues that a vibrant and diverse entertainment landscape – albeit one within careful limits – plays a crucial role in maintaining China's stability. Self-help and advice programming are particularly successful in this regard, she argues, as

> these programmes present themselves in such a way to have viewers believe that social issues such as poverty, unemployment, poor health, and so on, can in fact be solved […]. Instead of advocating social change, which might have political and ideological causes and consequences, these programmes present solutions which seem technical and scientific.

By noting the hidden politics in the seemingly apolitical, and by examining the media ecosystem as a whole, this paper takes long strides towards reconciling the divergent media studies and political science worldviews.

Jonathan Hassid's paper, "China's Responsiveness to Internet Opinion: A Double-Edged Sword", looks at how the party-state responds to the public pressure that builds when scandals are revealed. Using data from the international press, this contribution demonstrates that compared to a number of countries around the world, China's government acts unusually quickly to respond to and resolve ordinary citizens' demands for punishment when misdeeds are uncovered online or in the press. In the short run, this high level of official responsiveness to revealed scandal would seem to help China's *weiwen* goals, but in the long run, Hassid argues, this responsiveness might be misplaced. Rather than helping China build a more stable and independent judiciary, such responsiveness might undermine China's fitful progress toward building the rule of law. And instead of helping the people who might need it most (but remain offline), the party-state is showing worrying signs of listening mostly to netizens, a highly elite and circumscribed section of the population. Power holders' responsiveness, in short, might help preserve stability in the short run by endangering it later on.

Ashley Esarey's "Winning Hearts and Minds? Cadres as Microbloggers in China" scrutinizes individual officials and their motivations in choosing to promote official ideology on China's rapidly growing *weibo* (Twitter-like microblog) systems. He concentrates in particular on three mid-level officials from around the country who have become popular on *weibo* for their attempts to engage with government critics. Although clearly inspired by the party-state's desire to "maintain stability", these three official microbloggers find only minimal, fleeting success in convincing their immediate critics. But perhaps these immediate critics are not the true audience? His observation that

> the frequency with which the official microbloggers posted non-political commentary, relative to political content, seemed to reflect a desire to put a human face on propaganda and ideological work

in an effort to seek "the public's empathy, acceptance and support", mirrors Sun's paper in arguing for renewed attention to the systemic impact of even seemingly apolitical media content. Such "soft" stories, they argue, help maintain CCP dominance and are arguably more important in shaping hearts and minds than the official media's uninspiring, and unvarying, boilerplate. All in all, this is a remarkable

snapshot of the motivations and issues facing propagandists in a new world where *weibo* is "a powerful communication tool as well as a medium that could undermine traditional propaganda work".

Finally, Han Rongbin's fascinating "Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China's 'Fifty-Cent Army'", investigates the effect of paid internet propagandists on the discourse of popular internet comment sites. This "fifty-cent army" – so called because they are supposedly paid 50 Chinese cents per post – is mostly recruited among media employees and college students, especially those who demonstrate "loyalty to the party-state and online communication skills". The goal seems to be promotion of party-state interests without using the heavy hand of existing censorship tools. Ultimately, many different party organizations and even large companies engage these paid commentators for "astroturfing", the process of faking a groundswell of public support for political or economic gain. After a novel look at the recruitment, training and rewards of these commentators, Han then looks at the systemic impact these "fifty-centers" might have. While they might be effective in distracting the public or channelling support on particular issues, such success is fleeting.

> The [online commentator] system has increasingly become a liability rather than an asset. It is especially the case when the marks of state propaganda become too obvious,

Han finds. When ordinary netizens can easily detect the official interlopers, the party-state's efforts backfire and create a more confrontational public. In other words, unseen and unnoticed propaganda is often the most effective, and we hope other scholars continue to examine this fruitful area.

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From Poisonous Weeds to Endangered Species: *Shenghuo* TV, Media Ecology and Stability Maintenance

Wanning SUN

Abstract: The most common framework through which we understand media communication and political/social stability in China is that of hegemony and control. This characterization may have served us well in documenting how the mandate for stability often results in censorship, regulation and restriction, but it has two major faults: First, the focus on crackdowns, bans and censorship usually tells us something about what the party-state does not like, but does not convey much about what it does like. Second, it often obscures the routine ways the party-state and the market work together to shore up ideological domination and maintain stability. In this analysis of the policies, economics and content of a broad range of television programmes, I suggest that we look at the media and communication as an ideological-ecological system in order to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between China's media practices and its ongoing objectives.

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Keywords: China, media ecology, ideological-ecological system, life matter advice, media "species"

Dr. Wanning Sun is a professor of Chinese Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney. She is the author of three single-authored monographs, *Leaving China: Media, Migration, and Transnational Imagination* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), *Maid in China: Media, Morality and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries* (Routledge, 2009) and *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media and Cultural Practices* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). Together with Michael Keane, she has just edited the four-volume anthology *Chinese Media: Key Concepts and Critical Analysis* (Routledge 2013).
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Introduction

The most common framework within which we understand media communication and political and social stability in China is that of hegemony and control (e.g. Brady 2008; Hassid 2008; Tong 2010). This framework tends to take as given not only the desire and intention of the central propaganda authorities to control, but also the need on the part of the grassroots to contest and resist. This framework is often deployed to demonstrate the complex, ambiguous and often changing dynamics between the party-state and the market, and between the state and society, as well as the impact of such dynamics on China's social and political stability. This analytic matrix may have served us well in documenting how the mandate for stability often results in censorship, regulation and restriction. However, this framework comes with two problems. First, while a focus on censorship examines tensions between the party-state and the market, which flare up from time to time and threaten stability, it often obscures the everyday ways the two work together to bolster ideological domination and maintain stability. Second, the focus on crackdowns, bans and censorship usually informs us about certain things the party-state does not like, but it rarely reveals what it does like. Consequently, we are still somewhat unclear as to what constitutes the central propaganda authorities' normative expectations for the media. In other words, the question remains as to what the ideal "state of being" is that the party-state hopes to achieve through control.

But knowing the answer to this question is crucial to our understanding of how media contributes to stability maintenance. And since the government sees stability maintenance as pivotal to the realization of President Xi Jinping's "China Dream", understanding the party's expectations provides key clues to how China's media and communication system contributes to the rhetoric and vision of the China Dream at both the collective and individual levels. Intending this as a thought piece that aims to provoke further conversations rather than as an empirically based research paper, I evoke the metaphor of ecosystem in order to shed light on a few blind spots in the study of Chinese party-state's censorship practices. My main point is that by looking at China's media and communication as an ideological-ecological system, we can begin to explore the complex relationship and interaction between various media forms, genres and practices in the Chinese media and communication sector.

My use of the term "ecology" is deliberately undisciplined, aiming more to exploit the metaphoric value of the term than to profess a serious intention to join an established body of work on "media ecologies" (Clark 2009; Lum 2006; Strate 2006). Nevertheless, two insights from this "media ecology" approach are relevant here; the first is that media portrayals help sustain a relatively stable notion of human culture. This stability suggests the media works towards maintaining a state of equilibrium, keeping balance through a beneficent mix of media forms and practices. The second perspective is that media consists of a dynamic system in which any part is a variable, multiply connected, and therefore any media form or practice deserves to be viewed as part of a pattern rather than as a single, discrete object (Fuller 2007: 4). While taking these insights into consideration, my engagement of the metaphor also unfolds at a more specific level. To me, media genres and media formats are analogous to flora and fauna species, whose controlled diversity and complementarity need to be ensured in order that balance and equilibrium are maintained. My central argument is that in understanding the relationship between media practices and political stability, asking why some media genres and practices are allowed to thrive is as important as asking why others are culled or allowed to go "extinct".

Focusing on the Chinese television sector, I pursue this argument in two parts. In the first part, I analyse the nature of the government's anxiety regarding news and entertainment – the two "problematic" media genres that have lately come under tighter scrutiny. This is followed by a discussion of some "unproblematic" media forms. These programmes, including everyday advice and consumer information on a wide range of "life matters", contribute significantly to the balance of ideological ecology, and it may even be possible that they have done more for stability maintenance and the party-state's political legitimacy than have news and entertainment. Throughout the paper, I suggest that we should not only consider how control and censorship is exercised for the sake of achieving and maintaining stability but also look beyond news and entertainment for clues to how stability is achieved and maintained.

Entertainment a Win-Win Solution?

The political mantra of the reform period has been stability and unity, famously encapsulated in Deng Xiaoping's motto: "Stability trumps all" (稳定压倒一切, *wending yadao yiqe*). The connection between social and political stability and the regulation of media content is most obvious in numerous speeches made by the top leadership of the Central Propaganda Department (CPD). In a meeting organized by the CPD in January 2009, Li Changchun, a senior member of the Politburo, made it clear that

> those in the cultural sector of propaganda and thought work must try hard to improve media's capacity to lead and guide public opinion, to strengthen and reinforce "main melodies" (主旋律, *zhu xuanlü*) – that is, healthy and uplifting mainstream patterns of thought – and to work continuously in maintaining unity, stability and harmony (*China News* 2009).

Echoing this mandate, propaganda chief Liu Yunshan was more specific about propaganda strategies:

> We must simultaneously watch out for potential risks and adversities [and] demonstrate confidence and determination. And we must keep a delicate balance between promoting positive messages, on the one hand, and neutralizing negative public morale [疏导公众情绪, *shudao gongzhong qingxu*], on the other (*China News* 2009).

At the same time, the government is also acutely aware that this "delicate balance" can only be achieved through controlled diversity. This commitment to diversity is evidenced in the report delivered by Hu Jintao to the 18th Party Congress, when he said, "We must ensure that that our social and cultural life is 'diverse and plentiful' (丰富多彩, *fengfu duocai*), and that our cultural products become more abundant and diverse" (Hu 2012). In other words, the function of the media can no longer be to singularly serve the party; instead, media must be multifunctional and aim to

- communicate news and current affairs,
- uphold moral guidance,
- engage in scientific education,
- provide suitable recreation, and
- offer information and services useful in viewers' everyday lives.

Diversity is also logical given that the identity of the television viewer has multiplied. Whereas in the Maoist era, the viewer was little more than a member of the "masses" (群众, *qunzhong*), the viewer nowadays is simultaneously a sovereign subject of the Chinese nation, a consumer, a citizen and a member of the public. Similarly, to fulfil these multiple roles of the media and ensure that there is something for everyone, television genres also need to be diverse, including news and current affairs, entertainment, consumer information and advice, public service and community notices, as well as advertising, and so on.

As is the case elsewhere, news is considered by the government to be the most important media genre. But news, especially news in the government-run media, has a very serious credibility problem (Shirk 2011). Furthermore, more than other media genres, news shoulders the greater share of responsibility of producing and maintaining the "main melody" – the dominant ideological and political values of the regime. From the point of view of the government, news, if managed "properly", functions to maintain stability and shore up political legitimacy. However, if handled inappropriately, it runs the risk of causing or triggering widespread panic, chaos and social unrest. For fear of causing social instability, or in the name of maintaining stability, Chinese state media tends to deny or suppress sensitive information on a wide range of issues, including epidemic diseases, scandals involving food poisoning and accidents involving high numbers of causalities. The media's initial cover-up of the 2003 SARS epidemic for fear of causing widespread confusion and panic among the people was a most telling example of the party-state's instinctive desire to avoid chaos (Yu 2007, 2009; Shirk 2011). But it soon became apparent that such a tactic of risk management could only backfire, and would serve only to highlight the state's inaction as well as the disastrous consequences of its inaction on the Chinese people's sense of safety. In 2008, Chinese media's initial cover-up of the Sanlu milk formula poisoning scandal, one of many incidents of this nature, resulted in the illness of thousands of infants, causing outrage from major international media outlets including the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, who published intensive coverage on the incident featuring headlines such as "Censorship Isn't Good for China's Health" (Kine 2008). More than any other media genre, news has to walk a tightrope between control and transparency.

Besides the politically sensitive nature of news, news is also much more expensive than other types of programming to produce, and generally does not attract high ratings. Given the decentralization of provincial and local television industries in fiscal and administrative terms, it is understandable that local and provincial television does not want to make news production a core business, especially since other mediums such as the Internet and social media outlets are bringing about diverse sources of information, which makes production of television news an onerous task. Due to these factors, most provincial stations have reduced the production of local and provincial news. They generally relay only the half-hour compulsory news bulletin from CCTV each day on at least one of each province's stations. These changes have resulted in a gradual shift in the scale, amount and format of news in the Chinese media. At local and provincial levels, the percentage of news and current affairs in the total quantity of media content is much smaller. In contrast, entertainment, which is pivotal to the economic survival of media enterprises and attracts much higher ratings than news, is instead becoming more and more popular.

The Political Risk of Entertainment

However, while this strategy had reaped enormous economic benefits for the media industry, at the same time it had clearly tipped the balance desired by the central government. In October 2011, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) – since 2013 the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SPPRFT) – issued a set of directives that set out to "clean up the screen" and shake up Chinese television in a number of profound ways (Bai 2015: 69). Among the changes stipulated in SARFT's "Further Recommendations on the Regulation of Provincial Satellite Television Programmes" are an increase of the quantity of news, a reduction of the quantity of entertainment and an improvement of the quality of the remaining entertainment programmes. According to the recommendations, as of 1 January 2012, all provincial satellite stations must show at least two hours of locally produced news from 6 a.m. to midnight each day; there must be at least two news programmes from 6 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. each day, and each of these two news programmes must not be shorter than half an hour in duration. The

recommendations call for an increase in the percentage of content in the areas of economics, culture, science and education, and in children's programming and documentaries, in addition to news. It also orders the reduction, even culling, of seven types of entertainment programmes, including the genres of dating, talent shows, quiz shows, talk shows and reality TV. It also stipulates that provincial satellite TV broadcast no more than two shows each day, limited to a total of 90 minutes (*Renmin Ribao* 2011).

According to SARFT's official spokesperson, these recommendations are intended to address a worrisome tendency towards "excessive entertainization" (娱乐过度化, *yule guodu hua*). It is clear that "excessiveness" refers to both the quantity and quality of entertainment programmes – there is too much entertainment, and these entertainment programmes are too vulgar. A recent survey commissioned by SARFT of entertainment programmes on provincial satellite television finds that there are currently 126 entertainment programmes on 34 provincial satellite television stations, featuring mainly themes of dating and friendship, talent contests, melodramas, games and quizzes, variety shows and talk shows featuring celebrity hosts. In addition, the "vulgar taste" of entertainment programmes and "widespread uniformity of entertainment formats" on Chinese television also leads to a waste of resources and a stifling of content innovation (*Renmin Ribao* 2011).

In addition, according to a new ruling by SARFT, the television sector is now banned from engaging in three kinds of practices: publishing a ranking of television programme ratings, eliminating programmes purely on the basis of poor ratings and judging the quality of a programme based on its ratings (*Renmin Ribao* 2011). This decision has incurred the ire of media industries. Some complain that if SARFT wants to dictate how provincial television stations should conduct their business – meaning, expecting them to operate like a public service institution – SARFT should be prepared to foot the bill (Bandurski 2011). The industry's annoyance seems justifiable. After all, it was the party-state which decided to withdraw most of its funding and told media to embrace commercialization and competition and to seek alternative sources of income through market measures. Furthermore, media industries were repeatedly told that as long as they toe the party line in producing politically sensitive news, they

would be left alone to do whatever they wanted with other genres such as entertainment.

We can view SARFT's reactions to entertainment programmes on Chinese television as a form of moral panic, whereby the party-state steps in to assume the role of arbitrating and defining vulgarity, bad taste and unacceptable moral values. But the source of this panic is, however, not so much an innate, aggrieved moral sensibility; rather it is a new realization that instead of an ideologically safer zone that evades or camouflages social conflicts, entertainment programmes can potentially highlight and amplify them. And accentuation of social conflicts is bad for stability maintenance and must be avoided at all costs. It is precisely because of the fear of giving visibility to social conflicts that dating shows such as *Only If You Are the One* on provincial television are judged to be "vulgar" and "trashy". As the highest-rated show on Jiangsu Satellite Television, the show captured the imagination of the national audience with the myriad blunt and often cruel remarks made by its contestants. Ma Nuo, now dubbed the "BMW girl", became a household name in China for her declaration on television: "I'd rather sit in a rich man's BMW crying than sit on the back of someone's bike smiling". Zhu Zhengfang, dubbed the "big house girl", famously said in one of the episodes: "Only my boyfriend can touch my hand; anyone else who wants to touch it has to pay 200,000 yuan" (Chen 2011: 57). The popularity of the show both alarmed and enraged the Chinese authorities. Initially criticizing it for blatantly promoting materialistic and individualistic values, and aggravating the tension between the rich and the poor, SARFT requested that the show either lift its moral standard or risk suspension. Succumbing to pressure, the show went through a few cosmetic changes, adding rural migrant workers, communist party-school academics and economically and socially marginalized identities to the lists of participants.

Nevertheless, despite these interventions, SARFT's recommendations iterate its commitment to maintaining diversity.

> We are not objecting to the plentiful and stratified entertainment programmes which have mushroomed to cater to the diverse tastes and demands of audiences. We expect this to happen in a fast-changing society which is experiencing economic transition. But we do object to the tendency of some entertainment programmes to go down the slippery slope of vulgarity and trashiness (*Renmin Ribao* 2011).

In other words, diversity is desirable, and balance between serious news and entertainment needs to be maintained, but the government must dictate the terms and conditions by which such diversity and balance is maintained. These terms and conditions dictate that, first, the supremacy of "main melodies" must be upheld and, second, there must be a hierarchical ordering of television genres and formats as seen fit by the government and its delegated authorities.

What SARFT's recommendations do not make clear – but which one can directly deduce from them – is that the government wants to reclaim the ideological battlefield of news. Reclaiming this space is deemed important for two reasons: First, the increasingly widespread use of the Internet and the proliferation of social media platforms means that urban residents, especially educated ones, are getting their news online, and often from alternative sources. At the same time, the majority of the Chinese population – the rural, the elderly and women from socio-economically disadvantaged groups – still see television as the main source of information and recreation, yet this audience has only minimum access to news of any kind due to the reduction of news on television. Given this, it would seem that the government has good reason to fear that news with ideologically sound messages may become a threatened or even an endangered species warranting extra protective and restorative measures.

In other words, the mandate to bring back more news may well be driven by a desire to recover a lost ideological battleground. While this impulse is understandable, there does not seem to be any evidence to suggest that the news as envisaged by the central authority will be allowed to be any different from the past. There is no talk of reforming formulaic news formats, the non-controversial didactic style of reporting, the preference for positive stories, or the reliance on government officials as news sources. There is no intention to change core standards of news worthiness, which currently focus on achieving harmony, preserving stability, stimulating the economy and promoting patriotism and nationalism. In fact, we can say with near certainty that at least in the near future only news which promotes harmony (rather than focusing on conflicts) will be allowed to air.

Two motivations are plausible as the reasons behind SARFT's recommendations: First, by adding more unattractive news the party-state is simply trading the loss of audience appeal for an increased degree of balance and diversity. Second, entertainment programming

needs serious culling not simply because it is proliferating excessively. It is also because those entertainment programmes which highlight social conflicts and class tensions instead of promoting social harmony and stability are analogous to "poisonous weeds" – a metaphor which was in fact often used in socialist decades to describe "unhealthy", "bourgeois" cultural texts that must be eradicated. In other words, control of both quantity and quality is seen as necessary to keep entertainment from growing wildly, like weeds, spreading unchecked and tipping the ideological-ecological balance.

Ideologically Sound Programmes

The vibrant growth of entertainment programmes such as *Only If You Are the One* is a direct consequence of cutthroat competition in the television market. This competition is largely due to the fact that since 1998, at least one channel from each provincial television station has gone national via satellite transmission. Whereas before then only CCTV could reach a national audience, now the average Chinese household receives up to 30 provincial satellite channels and a range of local channels in addition to the national programmes, taking the competition between central and provincial television and among various provincial television stations to an unprecedented level (Zhao 2008).

Throughout the past two decades, two television genres have been the mainstay of Chinese television. One is drama serials, which comprise about 30 per cent of the total television content (Zhu, Keane, and Bai 2008: 1). Also, next to news and current affairs, it is also the most rigorously scrutinized and regulated form of programming (Zhao 2008). For this reason, the political economy and cultural politics of television drama as a genre and format has been systematically explored (Rofel 1994; Zhu, Keane, and Bai 2008). In contrast, another staple genre, *shenghuo* (生活, "everyday life") television, has so far largely eluded critical analysis.

The increasing popularity of *shenghuo* television can be explained in terms of privatization in the reform era. Privatization here does not simply refer to the rise of ownership of private property and the state's retreat from a wide range of social services, including housing, education and health care. Equally important, it also refers to the subsequent process of "self-fashioning" (Ong 2008) and "self-train-

ing" in the realm of personal ethics, morality and emotion. Having transformed themselves from a "work-unit person" to a "social person" (Farquhar and Zhang 2012), individuals in China, more than ever before, are searching on their own for answers and solutions to a wide range of ethical, moral and practical questions. For the first time, many people realize that they are having to make decisions and choices on their own. This has given rise to anxiety, disorientation and insecurity in both material and psychological terms (Zhang and Ong 2008). In response to this, a wide range of media genres and formats have emerged to meet a number of political needs: to defuse discontent or even anger stemming from various types of social conflict, be it along the lines of gender, class or place; to provide people with practical information and advice for their everyday lives; and to give moral and ethical guidance to individuals caught in myriad dilemmas regarding how to conduct oneself in the world, and in relation to others.

Shenghuo television does precisely these things. Nowadays, most local, provincial and national stations have a number of designated channels and programmes designated for *shenghuo* TV. On any given day, Chinese television is filled with a perplexing array of *shenghuo*-themed shows, encompassing topics such as cooking, renovation, travelling, shopping, fashion, health and well-being, personal finances, legal advice, psychological and emotional therapy, relationship counselling, marriage advice and family dispute mediation. Ranging from CCTV 2's renovation show *Changing Spaces* to Shanghai Television Channel Young's *Fashion Guide*, from local Bengbu Television's *Zero Distance to Health* to Zhejiang TV's *Woman Who Likes to Help*, a plethora of lifestyle programmes that combine information with entertainment and employ a diversity of formats such as talk shows, reality TV and quizzes and games deliver on a regular basis much-needed knowledge about how to survive the economic and social challenges posed by economic reforms. The latest theme in the *shenghuo* programmes is job-hunting, with half a dozen shows on provincial television such as Tianjing Satellite TV's *You Are Hired* vying for a national audience. In these shows, contestants subject themselves to the interrogation of prospective employers, and end up being accepted or rejected.

Shenghuo programmes combine practical knowledge and information with entertainment and are hugely popular (Xu 2007, 2009).

While they appear to be non-political on the surface, they are nevertheless more effective in teaching people a wide range of skills which are necessary to survive the turbulence caused by the transition from socialism to a neoliberal market economy. And in doing so, these shows perform a profoundly ideological role on behalf of both the party-state and capital (Lewis, Martin, and Sun 2012). In contrast to entertainment-oriented shows such as dating shows, which have offended central authorities for their provocative comments, the great majority of *shenghuo* programmes have served the twin masters of the party-state and the market most effectively by trumpeting the neoliberal messages, busily turning social issues such as poverty, poor health and lack of opportunities for individuals from disenfranchised groups into positive stories of diligent individuals achieving personal growth and self-cultivation, be it in the domain of health or mental and psychological well-being. These programmes give viewers the illusion – camouflaged as hope – that as long as one tries hard enough, these problems can be overcome. This is most clearly evidenced in the more than 1,300 lifestyle programmes on Chinese television which are devoted to teaching the nation how to engage in health improvement and take part in the "art of nourishing life" (养生, *yangsheng*) (Zhou 2011). In other words, a nation of individuals who are excessively preoccupied with and actively involved in maintaining and improving their own health is deemed patently more conducive to stability than a population that is politically subversive and socially discontented. While the didactic instructions from party leaders and government officials are often viewed with scepticism, the advice on a range of "life matters" comes from doctors, psychologists, scientists and experts, and the public often sees no reason to suspect that these shows have any hidden agenda other than transmitting scientific, objective and practical knowledge. It is precisely for this reason that some suggest that commercial media in China in fact can do more effective "thought work", since readers, while they can be sceptical of the state media, nevertheless have an implicit trust in the commercial media outlets (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Stockmann 2013).

Moreover, these programmes present themselves in such a way to have viewers believe that social issues such as poverty, unemployment, poor health, and so on, can in fact be solved if the individual seeks to improve her- or himself through learning and self-development – whether it is through improving one's appearance, attitude or

social and cultural capital. Instead of advocating social change, which might have political and ideological causes and consequences, these programmes present solutions which seem technical and scientific (Sun and Zhao 2009). The ideological desirability and political viability of these media products that advocate self-responsibility becomes clear when judged against the criteria of "good" cultural practice envisaged by the outgoing Party Chairman Hu Jintao, who said in his report to the 18th Party Congress, "We must guide our people to engage in cultural practices in which they can express themselves, educate themselves and provide service to themselves" (Hu 2012).

In other words, SARFT has no problems with entertainment. What it does not like is entertainment with no clear – or worse, with a questionable – moral orientation. Entertainment that teaches people "desirable" values is eminently more preferable. Media practitioners are repeatedly reminded of the importance of "education through entertainment" (寓教于乐, *yu jiao yu le*). Producers of *shenghuo* programmes are masterful in acting out this ethos. Featuring the strong message of self-improvement and self-responsibility, and armed with experts, counsellors and scientists ready to dispense guidance and advice, these shows are thriving like "young spring bamboo shoots after a rain" (to use another ecological metaphor in Chinese).

Education through Entertainment

We now turn to some examples of how "education through entertainment" is accomplished. The first example is from national television. Every Sunday evening, the nation is treated to a new episode of *Under the Auctioneer's Hammer* on CCTV. The programme follows this format: The owner of the art object introduces the item, usually an antique piece of art, be it a Ming Dynasty vase or a Qing Dynasty urn; the owner is then invited to weave in autobiographical information, including how the art object came into his or her possession. An expert – usually an art historian – is called upon to give historical and cultural knowledge about the art object; the owner is invited to name a price; a panel of bidders take turns estimating the worth of the object in dollars; the owner is offered a chance to provide a rejoinder to the evaluations from the panel; the three highest bidders are invited to engage in another round of bidding amongst themselves; and, finally, either a deal is struck or the object is passed on. The show

finishes with a final assessment and evaluation from an art investment specialist, who offers his opinion on whether the bidder has paid too much or the owner has sold for too little, according to the market price.

There are no right and wrong decisions made on this show – only sound and unsound investments, and risk-taking or risk-averse individuals. By providing a regular dose of knowledge that mixes art, history, money and objects for the high-brow viewer who is seeking opportunities to maximize his or her financial gains from a wide range of middle-class financial activities – be it dabbling in the stock market, investing in real estate or purchasing antique furniture or expensive art work – the shows encourages the formation of a "prudent subject of risk", who must be "responsible, knowledgeable and rational" (O'Malley 1996: 202). The crucial point of linkage is the notion of value, to be explored, understood and assessed according to the interweaving logic of the artistic value and market worth. More importantly, the show encourages the individual to own up to their responsibility for the choices and decisions they make and the risk they take. Each participant in the show – the bidders as well as the owner of the art object – is there to take a calculated risk. While everyone can win, the winner is someone who has taken it upon himself to master the knowledge of the most useful market-driven strategies and calculative tactics, and who is most capable of translating this knowledge into practice. In other words, if you win, you deserve it because you have done your homework; if you lose, you deserve it equally, because you have not done your homework. Here, the difference between the rich and poor seems attributable to the difference in one's willingness and capacity to take the initiative, own up to one's responsibilities and acquire the techniques and skills necessary to exploit the logic of risk, rather than becoming the victim of it.

To move from national to local television and get a representative sample from the latter, let us turn to Bengbu TV. Bengbu is a third-tier city in the relatively less developed province of Anhui in Eastern China. In comparison with national and metropolitan channels, *shenghuo* programmes we see on local terrestrial television such as Bengbu TV are made on a shoestring budget and appear decidedly basic – some may say crude – in their style, presentation and content. Despite this, *Zero Distance to Health*, a health and well-being programme featuring a number of segments, including the "Health Hot-

line" and "Doctors' Forum", runs for half an hour each day, and is repeated once the following day. On the episode from 30 May 2011, a day I chose randomly for analysis, viewers are told to be aware of ten killers in the kitchen, including but not limited to dishwashing rags (containing germs), cupboards (harbouring germs), the refrigerator (a place for germs to cross-fertilize), detergent (for its chemical ingredients), food packaging (plastics can cause infertility), plastic wrapping (which can cause cancer when heated and consumed) and frying pans (which can cause a fire). Again, this information comes from experts, whose identity, credentials and sources of information almost always remain unknown. The host of the Health Hotline seems to assume it is sufficient to tell viewers, often through her own voice-over, that this advice comes from "a report written in Europe and the US", and that the suggestions are based on the "latest scientific research". The final segment on the show is about how to correctly choose antibiotics, in view of a widely held assumption that newer and more expensive antibiotics deliver a more effective outcome. The programme suggests, quoting doctors, that generic antibiotics, which may not be as expensive as new brands, may be even more suitable or effective than the brand-name varieties, so patients should learn to discern the appropriate antibiotics based on function rather than brand.

Local television such as Bengbu TV regularly presents a large amount of "neutral" information and knowledge – scientific, legal, financial and technological – which consumers and citizens must acquire in order to manage the risks of everyday life. Although the figure of the cultural intermediary – doctors, scientists and counsellors – is crucial, it is down to the individuals to assume the responsibility for managing risk. With the dissolution of work units, and the disappearance of its attendant modes of top-down, mass-movement, campaign-style propaganda, television in the living room in the reform era, turned on and off with the remote control of an entire nation of individual viewers, becomes the means and medium of inculcating the new-fangled ethics of self-responsibility.

Audiences are not only encouraged to be self-responsible, they are also told to adjust, correct and improve their behaviour, personality and their ways of thinking and feeling in order to achieve harmony and success in life. To promote this idea, emotional, psychological and relationship counsellors are in high demand. We can see how this works from an episode of *Speak Loudly*, a relationship coun-

selling show on Chongqing Satellite TV. The episode from 3 June 2013 features a young, quarrelling couple about to get married. Having given the couple the opportunity to justify and account for their respective behaviour, the experts step in to diagnose the problem, offer advice and, above all, provide moral critique. When the young woman complains that her fiancé no longer indulges and spoils her as he did in their university years, Tu Lei, a prominent relationship counsellor on the panel, has this to say to her:

> Have you thought about why he is no longer happy with you? It's not just because you can't make beds or you don't want to wash dishes. You have a more serious problem. You haven't realized that that when you were young, put on your feminine charm, and demanded to be indulged by your boyfriend, people may think you are cute; but now you are an adult and about to start a married life, and if you still behave like a child, you will repulse people. People change, and their roles change, too. You need to grow up.

The presence of intermediaries such as emotional and psychological counsellors makes these shows more didactic than *If You Are the One*. This difference may partly explain why they do not travel as well as *If You Are the One*, which appeals to international as well as Chinese audiences. At the same time, more anchored in Chinese morality and cultural values, the aim of these didactic shows is to guide as well as to entertain. Their gentle persuasion as well as scathing condemnation (as evidenced in the above comment) constitutes for viewers a new form of disciplinary power in post-socialist China. This power requires the individual to engage in the "process of problematization" by asking which aspects of their behaviour can be changed and improved (Rose 1998: 25).

Actively promoting the message of self-responsibility and self-improvement, these programmes are the unsung heroes in the ideological ecology of the Chinese television, but their role in the process of stability maintenance has gone widely unacknowledged. To be sure, they are not as spectacularly highly rated as dating shows such as *Only If You Are the One*, and they are not a direct vehicle to communicate the government's political agenda. They are analogous to those flora species which, though they are humble in appearance and grow easily in most places, are nevertheless crucial in preventing soil erosion, desertification, droughts and floods. These programmes can simultaneously promote socialist values and a neoliberal agenda, and

yet the ideologies implicit in them are so deeply embedded that they appear to be merely common sense and "natural". Rather than highlighting social tensions, as some dating shows do, these lifestyle programmes activate the trope of motivation, self-help and personal growth, giving people the message that everyone has equal access to opportunities and social mobility. For this reason, such shows have a profoundly ideological impact of rendering social conflicts invisible, yet the party-state, television sector and the market do not care to openly admit their ideological and political usefulness.

Conclusion

Focusing on controversial media formats and genres tells us what happens when political needs and market initiatives clash, posing a potential threat to stability. But this is only half of the picture. The other half, which runs the risk of being obscured by the focus on censorship, is equally, if not more, important: How do the party-state authorities and the market work together to ensure that the stability-maintenance machinery is well-oiled and functioning smoothly?

There is a widespread assumption informing the regulation policy: Diversity in media content is necessary not in spite of, but precisely because of, the mandate to preserve stability. The implicit assumption is that if various parts of the media are implemented and interact as they should, the balance and "biodiversity" of the ideological-ecological system should remain intact, and hence stability can be ensured. Similarly to the way that balance and equilibrium are needed to ensure ecological soundness in the natural world, policy statements and top leaders view the balance and equilibrium of various forces – social, cultural, economic and political – as the key to both maintaining stability and realizing the China Dream. Although it is widely known that news on state television has to promote "main melodies" through hackneyed formats, the propaganda dosage is mostly well-balanced, counteracted and made bearable by its being sugarcoated with a plethora of entertainment programmes so that, ultimately, watching television is on the whole an entertaining experience rather than a didactic one.

In light of this, the mission of the party-state is not to control media for the sake of control, but to carefully monitor and intervene in a timely fashion to stem any tendency which, from the authorities'

point of view, threatens the balance and equilibrium of the ideological ecosystem. In the same way that the introduction of a foreign species or the sudden death of an existing species may be cause for concern regarding the balance of the natural world, the diversity of various media genres is a delicate and ongoing balancing act. When the political need to maintain diversity dovetails with the market's drive for profit, equilibrium is achieved. This equilibrium may well be what Hu Jintao means when he says that the social benefit of cultural production must take precedence but that the ultimate goal is to achieve "synergy between social benefit and economic benefit" (Hu 2012). However, when the market forces get the better of the politics, SPPRFT does not hesitate to step in and "play God". As Brady (2008) observes in her study of the control mechanism of propaganda, ideological concerns are still more important than economic concerns, as far as the mission of propaganda work is concerned.

Comparing television genres and formats on state-owned Chinese media outlets to living organisms in the natural environment is analytically useful, as long as we are clear about one major premise: The diversity of media genres, formats and practices on Chinese television is not the same thing as – and in fact, may even work to inhibit – political pluralism, tolerance of alternative ideological perspectives and an expanded space for public debate or in-depth investigation. In deploying the metaphor of biodiversity, it has not been my intention to imply that the party-state, through SARFT, has consciously applied an ecological approach in its policy deliberations. What I have done is to describe and account for the ways in which the Chinese propaganda authorities manage the environment of the Chinese media and communications sector to achieve and maintain social and political stability. This perspective allows us to better delineate the internal connections and relationships within the sector. We are therefore able to throw into sharp relief a large proportion of media content, such as life advice programmes, whose stabilizing role is largely unnoticed, let alone understood. An ecological lens enables us to view the various parts of the Chinese media landscape as inherently connected and mutually impacting. Unlike the control and propaganda perspective, which focuses on censorship, an ecological approach allows us to illuminate areas that have previously been obscured despite demonstrating a profound political impact.

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China's Responsiveness to Internet Opinion: A Double-Edged Sword

Jonathan HASSID

Abstract: Despite its authoritarian bent, the Chinese government quickly and actively moves to respond to public pressure over misdeeds revealed and discussed on the internet. Netizens have reacted with dismay to news about natural and man-made disasters, official corruption, abuse of the legal system and other prominent issues. Yet in spite of the sensitivity of such topics and the persistence of China's censorship apparatus, Beijing usually acts to quickly address these problems rather than sweeping them under the rug. This paper discusses the implications of China's responsiveness to online opinion. While the advantages of a responsive government are clear, there are also potential dangers lurking in Beijing's quickness to be swayed by online mass opinion. First, online opinion makers are demographically skewed toward the relative "winners" in China's economic reforms, a process that creates short-term stability but potentially ensures that in the long run the concerns of less fortunate citizens are ignored. And, second, the increasing power of internet commentary risks warping the slow, fitful – but genuine – progress that China has made in recent years toward reforming its political and legal systems.

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Keywords: China, Chinese media, microblogging, public opinion, Chinese politics, new media, *weibo*

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Introduction

In 2014 China ranked 175th (out of 180) in international press freedom (Reporters Without Borders 2014), boasted the world's most sophisticated internet censorship apparatus (MacKinnon 2009) and had more journalists in prison than any other country on Earth (Reporters Without Borders 2013). Yet these facts mask the surprising reality that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) responds quickly to public opinion, especially when expressed online. When Chinese netizens uncover and publicize official abuse of power (Wines 2010), corruption (*People's Abstracts* 2004) or fatal negligence (*China Daily* 2011a), authorities often react quickly and decisively to resolve the exposed problems. The result is a system that strongly discourages political discussion and criticism but is highly responsive to incidents that evade censorship and capture public attention. Commentators, reporters and scholars have seen this responsiveness as a hopeful sign of political change (Wang et al. 2009; Noesselt 2013) and as a way to preserve internal stability, but, as I argue below, there are hidden dangers in authorities' consistent bending to popular outrage.

Below, this article[1] is divided into three parts. After a brief background section on the Chinese media and internet public opinion, the CCP's surprising responsiveness to online demands is demonstrated by case studies and a quantitative analysis of international press stories. Together, these data show how, when and why the Chinese party-state reacts to internet pressure. With reference to a 2013 survey of Chinese microbloggers, the paper's third section discusses the implications of this state responsiveness, and shows how it might undermine official efforts to build a responsible and (reasonably) effective judiciary. Ultimately, the party-state's actions might build and reinforce a new dictatorship – not of the proletariat, but of the commentariat.

1 This research was generously funded by a faculty Research Development Grant at the University of Technology, Sydney. It has benefitted from the help and comments of Jon Sullivan, Wanning Sun, the participants in a panel at the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting in 2015 and several anonymous reviewers. One section is adapted from previous work done with Jennifer N. Brass, but any errors are my own.

The Chinese Media, Briefly

China closely censors its domestic media. A system of interlocking government and CCP departments, coordinated by the party's secretive Central Propaganda Department (CPD, 中宣部, *Zhongxuanbu*), together ensure that most commercial media companies – including newspapers, television and radio broadcasters, book publishers, filmmakers and others – hew tightly to party-state demands (Brady 2008). News outlets are especially tightly controlled; to found a newspaper requires an official party-state sponsor, registered capital of at least 300,000 CNY (48,000 USD), a detailed feasibility study, work permits, "certificates of qualification of the editorial and publishing personnel", various application forms in quintuplicate, and a great deal more (official regulations as translated by Chang, Wan and Qu 2006). Even a successful application, once approved by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, formerly known as the SARFT), does not end the hassle. Once in business,

> the publication of periodicals shall continue to be guided by the principles of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, and the "Three Represents", [and] adhere to the orientation and guiding role of publishing and the mass media (Regulations for the Administration of Periodical Publication 2005, Ch. 1, Article 3, translated by Chang, Wan and Qu 2006: 429).

And if a newspaper "does not reach the prescribed" – but undefined – standard, the agency "shall revoke [its] Periodical Publication Permit" (Regulations for the Administration of Periodical Publication 2005, Ch. 3, Article 47).

The day-to-day uncertainty about where the censorship axe might next fall is even more constraining than these formal procedural requirements. Unlike Glavlit, the Soviet Union's huge censorship apparatus, China's CPD does not pre-screen content before publication. Instead, CPD officials punish transgressive media outlets and writers after publication, often without stating the reason for punishment, and sometimes acting days, weeks or even months after the violation. The "regime of uncertainty" created by this *post hoc* censorship system means that journalists and editors are often unsure about the limits of the permissible, which encourages them to be quite con-

servative when approaching topics with even a hint of sensitivity (Hassid 2008). After all, it pays to be careful in the world's most prolific jailer of journalists.

A similar system of *post hoc* censorship prevails online, made possible by the world's largest and most sophisticated internet-monitoring system. This "Great Firewall", part of which is known in China as the "Golden Shield Project", relies on filtering keywords, blocking IP addresses and blacklisting websites, a system backed by thousands of internet police who monitor domestic sites and discussion boards (MacKinnon 2009). The end result is a system that allows most Chinese citizens little access to information that the party-state considers suspect. And as China remains (as of 2013) the country most likely to jail netizens for online political expression, the consequences for disobedience can be severe (Reporters Without Borders 2013).

Although it is important not to downplay the role that censorship plays on the Chinese internet, in general there is much more space available for discussion of potentially sensitive political and social topics than exists in the traditional media (Yang 2009). Moreover, while many parts of this censorship apparatus are run from Beijing – especially those that completely block access to unwanted domain names – this system is, for the most part, quite decentralized. Most day-to-day decisions about deleting individual posts rest with content providers and hosting services themselves, rather than being directed from on high. For bloggers, the end result is wide variation in the aggressiveness of hosting services in censoring sensitive topics, a variation that can present opportunities to canny users (MacKinnon 2009).

China's Surprisingly Responsive Government

Despite this censorship, there is no shortage of sophisticated users willing to brave the potential perils of challenging censorship authorities. Journalists, public intellectuals, writers, lawyers and ordinary citizens can have a substantial impact online, shaping the discussion of even sensitive issues in surprising ways. Although the traditional media, including the enduringly robust Chinese newspaper industry, maintain a substantial hold on shaping the agenda of Chinese internet discussion, news is increasingly broken online. Even if it is not yet quite true that, as Susan Shirk writes, "because of its speed, the inter-

net is the first place news appears [, as] it sets the agenda for other media" (Shirk 2011: 2), certainly the internet is becoming more important every day in exposing problems and shaping public policy.

But note that this paper's discussion of government "responsiveness" in China refers to state actions to quickly punish (exposed) culpable parties, as opposed to the more general willingness to respond to public opinion described by other scholars such as Shambaugh (2008) and He and Warren (2011). Certainly there are other mechanisms of official accountability in China, such as the letters and visits system (信访制度, *xinfang zhidu*), the mass press, and even the foreign media, but these are outside this paper's scope. In other words, the responsiveness I discuss here refers only to Chinese official willingness to respond to scandals quickly and decisively, usually by punishing exposed wrongdoers. Other scholars have proposed similar definitions, often depending on how state elites quell public anger (e.g. Besley and Burgess 2001; Thompson 2000). It is important not to mistake responsiveness for accountability; responsiveness refers to official response to citizens, while accountability refers to routinized citizen response to official action. Even if China is quite responsive to online public pressure in particular circumstances, this responsiveness does not imply that officials are very accountable to their local constituents.

It should also be emphasized that in general the central state has set an anti-corruption agenda and written a script for netizens to follow. For years, central officials have emphasized their desire to fight corruption in the party, and Xi Jinping has made pursuing corrupt officials a centrepiece of his administration. When statements against corruption emanate from Beijing, they create space for netizens and media figures to go after the local problems that central officials have condemned (and are often unaware of). Taking the state at its word – even when different officials or different layers of the state disagree – can be a powerful force encouraging citizen activism (O'Brien 1996). In other words, although the examples in this paper demonstrate the power of public opinion to move a reluctant state, the central state itself has set the agenda in this area and provided encouragement and cover for ordinary citizens to take it at its word. We might therefore see party-state responsiveness to uncovered scandal not as the result of a wayward citizenry but instead as a result of the desire of some top officials to get public support in policy

fights with their colleagues at various levels of the sprawling bureaucracy. Others have similarly argued that the party-state allows some public criticism to serve as a "fire alarm" and help top officials uncover lower-level corruption (Lorentzen 2014). Turning to citizens to overcome perceived party problems is not new in China – Mao Zedong famously urged the people to attack the party in 1966 – but it does suggest that the state responsiveness to uncovered scandals is only partially "forced" by citizen pressure. But whether encouraged by top officials or not, China's state responsiveness to citizen pressure over uncovered scandals is still noteworthy.

One of the most famous (and oft-cited) demonstrations of the power of Chinese public opinion to sway national policy came in the wake of the 2003 Sun Zhigang incident. Sun, a college-educated worker from China's interior who had moved to the southern city of Guangzhou, was arrested by police in March of that year for not carrying his local residence permit. Sent to a detention facility for internal migrants, within 24 hours Sun was dead, beaten to death by guards and inmates at the facility (Hand 2006). This case is particularly illustrative of the connections between media online and off. An enterprising reporter at the feisty *Nanfang Dushibao* (南方都市报, *Southern Metropolis Daily*) first discovered the death through the internet postings of Sun's anguished family members. This discovery led the paper to boldly publish a story on Sun's death, which in turn created uproar online, leading to other articles in the mainstream press. Within weeks, Beijing had scrapped the entire system of internal detention facilities, amounting to a huge victory for the concentrated power of public opinion. Crucially, however, the online community was mobilized behind someone seen as one of them – a white collar, college-educated professional. It is unlikely that Sun's death would have provoked any reaction if he were a more typical migrant, a point I return to later in the paper.

Although the aftermath of the Sun Zhigang case is sometimes seen as a high-water mark for CCP responsiveness to public opinion, many subsequent cases have demonstrated that when enough netizens get sufficiently angry, authorities react quickly to assuage their demands. When Niuniu, the daughter of a prominent official in the southern city of Shenzhen, released a 2004 film called *Seven-Hour Time Difference* (时差七小时, *Shicha Qi Xiaoshi*), government connections ensured that the film was made mandatory viewing in all middle

schools in the huge metropolis – forcing families to pay a fee of 20 CNY (3 USD) per student (*People's Abstracts* 2004). While this seems like a miniscule amount of money, pirated films generally sell for less than half this amount, and Shenzhen's population of over 10 million ensures a large number of potential student viewers and a correspondingly large profit. After an online uproar encouraged further newspaper investigation into the scandal, it emerged that much of the film's 7.69 million CNY (1.2 million USD) in financing had mysteriously come from Li Yizhen, Niuniu's father. Li, a public servant, most likely had an official income of only a few hundred dollars a month (Fish 2012). And once wrongdoing was exposed, the backlash became fierce. The renowned *Zhongguo Qingnianbao* (中国青年报, *China Youth Daily*) thundered:

> Regardless of what happens, this papering over [of the scandal] must be exposed. If in fearing to infuriate everyone further, [the perpetrators] adopt an ostrich posture [pretend the problem does not exist], eventually they will be given even more severe punishments (quoted in *People's Abstracts* 2004).

Eventually the film-screening plan was dropped, and the presumably corrupt Li Yizhen was removed from office (*Baidu Baike* 2012).

Public pressure, activated by an outraged traditional media, was also key in forcing an end to the 2007 brick kiln scandal that raged in central China. The Dickensian crime centred around the discovery that hundreds – perhaps as many as 1,000 – children had been kidnapped and forced to work as slaves in illegal brick kilns across Shanxi and Henan provinces. The kilns had apparently operated for years in collusion with local CCP officials, who reportedly took a share in the profits in return for providing political protection. As the research director of a Hong Kong-based labour NGO put it,

> It's inconceivable that slave labour and gross physical abuse on the scale it's been reported could possibly have gone on without full knowledge of local officials (Ni 2007).

The issue finally received national coverage only after hundreds of distraught fathers who had already "spent all their money and risked their lives to go deep into the mountains looking for their children" posted an online petition that came to the attention of local TV reporters (Zhu 2007). The report attracted immediate attention in newspapers and on the internet; as a result, hundreds of slaves were

freed, several death sentences were handed down, and 95 local CCP officials were demoted, expelled from the party or removed from office (Ni 2007). Although many of the sentences were decried as too lenient, they still represent an unusual victory of public pressure over entrenched local power holders.

A more recent example involved Li Qiming, a 22-year-old who after a night of heavy drinking struck two students with his car on the campus of Hebei University, killing one and injuring the other. When campus police attempted to apprehend Li, he reportedly shouted "Go ahead, sue me if you dare! My dad is [local deputy police chief] Li Gang!" (*China Daily* 2011b) The case generated such intense interest that "My dad is Li Gang!" (我爸是李刚, *Wo ba shi Li Gang*) quickly became a cynical online catchphrase for those looking to avoid responsibility for problems they had caused (*BBC News* 2011). After a "massive outcry both online and offline" (*China Daily* 2011b), even an attempted payoff to the victims' families, a tearful apology on national television (Liu 2010) and the best efforts of his "well-connected" father were not enough to keep Li out of prison (*BBC News* 2011).

Perhaps most emblematic of the growing power of public opinion – especially on the internet – in China is the aftermath of the July 2011 Wenzhou train crash. The crash, which killed 40 people and injured hundreds, was the first involving China's brand-new and highly vaunted high-speed rail system. Despite both a CPD internal order that reporters "do not question, do not elaborate" on the disaster (Osnos 2012) and the hasty burial of the wrecked train cars by the powerful Railway Ministry, within days netizens "posted an astounding 26 million messages on the tragedy, including some that have forced embarrassed officials" to more thoroughly investigate (Wines and LaFraniere 2011). Ultimately, public demands for accountability led to the dismissal of the railway officials and a slowdown in the break-neck pace of (often shoddy) railway construction (Osnos 2012: 52).

Admittedly, these are unusual examples. Most official malfeasance probably goes undetected, and even cases uncovered by party-state investigators rarely result in punishments for offenders (Wedeman 2004). But while punishment for official miscreants is rare, punishment for officials caught in the public eye is swift and merciless. When netizens uncover corruption or publicize a case initially reported in the traditional media, they put pressure on the Chinese party-

state to quickly punish the guilty and assuage public anger. These cases reflect, I argue, the typical official response to publically uncovered corruption. While the case selection is not random, I have aimed to pick cases from all walks of life and to choose both major and minor incidents. In my view, the end result is a selection of reasonably typical cases.

Note the limitations of this argument: I am not arguing that corruption is always uncovered, nor do I claim that uncovered corruption is always punished appropriately. But when malfeasance comes to the public eye, authorities move quickly to punish allegedly guilty parties. Although the CCP might be unable or unwilling to curb systemic corruption, it is certainly capable of responding swiftly and decisively to public pressure. Under the right circumstances, therefore, China has a highly responsive government.

China's Responsiveness from a Comparative Perspective

Many China scholars have maintained a certain insularity that prevents examination of similar phenomena in other places around the globe. Recent work by scholars such as Sarah Oates on the Russian media (2013) and a special issue of the *Journal of Communication* (62, 2, 2012) on the Arab Spring should have relevance for scholars looking to place the Chinese media into an international context. A 2012 follow-up to Hallin and Mancini's influential 2004 book *Comparing Media Systems* has expanded beyond a Western context, with a chapter by Zhao Yuezhi looking at China's media from a comparative perspective. Such work is, however, still relatively rare.

Aiming in part to address this lacuna, below is a brief comparison of the responsiveness of the Chinese and Kenyan governments to public pressure. Note that this section is based on previous research conducted with co-author Jennifer N. Brass and published elsewhere (Hassid and Brass 2014). Although Kenya and China are quite different, the use of such distinct outliers allows us to "inductively identify variables and hypotheses that have been left out of existing theories" (Bennett 2004: 38) using the crucial-case method (Gerring 2001). In theory, Kenya, a democratic country with a free press, should be more likely to change policy in response to public demands than China, a one-party dictatorship. Because Kenya's regu-

lar election cycles allow ordinary Kenyans to remove their leaders for non-performance, conventional wisdom dictates that Kenyan politicians should react quickly when the public demands they solve a particular issue. Chinese politicians, not facing the pressures of a ballot box, should, by contrast, be free to govern as they see fit, without reference to the wants or needs of even the angriest mass public.

To measure the responsiveness of the Chinese and Kenyan regimes to public pressure, we searched the EBSCO newspaper database for English-language articles that contained the country name (China or Kenya) plus either "scandal", "graft" or "corruption" from 2000 to 2010. After discarding articles that were not relevant, 258 articles on China and 248 on Kenya remained. In neither case were domestic newspaper articles used, in order to preclude the influence of local censorship and media control, especially germane in the Chinese case. Although the international press is only likely to report on the largest, most prominent scandals, its coverage is still likely to better represent Chinese and Kenyan conditions than the muzzled local press.

This is particularly true because those scandals that do receive domestic press scrutiny have generally already been handled. Often the first that citizens hear of official corruption cases is an announcement by official outlets *People's Daily* or the *Xinhua News Agency*. There are exceptions, but a reliance on the Chinese domestic press would erroneously imply that all corruption that comes to official attention is punished harshly. Though data are necessarily sketchy, one scholar has found that "provincial supervisory bureaus turned only 6 per cent of those found guilty of disciplinary infractions over to the legal system" and that "of those subject to administrative action, over half (53 per cent) received minor sanctions" (Wedeman 2004). Relying on domestic Chinese media coverage would risk biasing the data. International press coverage, by contrast, is not hampered by these restrictions and is not likely to vary substantially across international borders. Admittedly, this method is not perfect; international press coverage is dominated by a few outlets in the US and UK, and media outlets' systematic use of wire service reports concentrates this coverage further. Ultimately, however, international press coverage seems a reasonable proxy for how scandals are handled around the world.

Next, computer content analysis (CCA) software called Yoshikoder allowed a comparison of the words in the articles with a "dictionary" of pre-defined keywords sorted into categories (see Sullivan and Lowe 2010, for an earlier example). To determine whether the government responded to scandals, categories that suggest a judicial response were chosen: words related to prison, punishment and the judiciary (see the appendix for a full list). Analysing words in these categories allows us to look at how frequently uncovered scandals result in sanctions for those involved. These results are presented in Table 1. The table also presents similar results from a comparison of baseline, non–scandal-related articles to ensure a legitimate point of comparison. The point of this comparison is to elicit from the press how many scandals and other forms of questionable behaviour are eventually acted upon in both countries.

Table 1: Content Analysis Results for Articles on Scandals in China and Kenya, with Baseline (T-Test)

	Country	Mean number of words per scandal article	Mean number of words per baseline (non-scandal) article	Mean difference (China-Kenya, scandal articles)	Mean difference (China-Kenya, baseline)
Judiciary	Kenya	1.73	1.45	-0.05	-1.15***
	China	1.68	0.30		
Prison	Kenya	0.62	0.60	1.18***	-0.06
	China	1.80	0.54		
Punishment	Kenya	0.35	0.21	0.23*	-0.1*
	China	0.58	0.11		
Article word count	Kenya	978.34	786.61	18.58	-161.24***
	China	959.76	625.37		

Source: Hassid and Brass 2014.

Notes: *p<.05, ***p<.001.

Using a simple t-test, two categories of words show statistically significant differences between press coverage of Chinese and Kenyan

scandals: words related to prison and to punishment. These results suggest that when the media reveals Kenyan scandals, those involved are less likely to go to prison or otherwise be punished than their Chinese counterparts. Indeed, articles on Chinese scandals are nearly three times as likely as those about Kenya to mention imprisonment and almost twice as likely to mention other punishments, suggesting a very real difference in outcomes between the two countries. This difference is especially pronounced compared to the baseline, non-scandal articles, which discuss the judiciary and punishment more in Kenya than China.

Although the absolute difference seems small – around one extra "punishment"-related word per four articles about Chinese compared to Kenyan scandals – this does not imperil substantive analysis of the results. In this case, nearly twice as many newspaper articles mention punishment in China than in Kenya. Content analysis, especially of newspaper articles averaging only approximately 1,000 words, often produces such seemingly small differences (Popping 2000). Indeed, because the newspaper corpus reflects dozens of articles on each individual scandal at all stages from discovery to resolution, wildly divergent results between the two countries would be unexpected. Here, the results suggest a meaningfully higher number of reports of punishment and imprisonment in revealed Chinese scandals compared to Kenyan ones. A dictatorship, in other words, can indeed be more responsive to public pressure than a democracy, under the right conditions.

To ensure that these results were not just a reflection of an unusual country pairing, Jennifer N. Brass and I expanded this analysis to every country with a 2010 Freedom House score (N=162). Using the same methods described above, we created a unique dataset of 17,160 articles for these 162 countries. When controlling for GDP per capita, population and other variables, no combination of Freedom House's Civil Liberties or Political Rights variables proved statistically significantly related to punishments meted out for scandals. Some might suggest that a comparison with other culturally similar countries might be more revealing, but Singapore (classed as "partly free" in 2010) and Taiwan (classed as "free") both have similar levels of state scandal response to China. Indeed, China scores higher on responsiveness than Singapore in every category tested, and Taiwan is

only mildly more responsive than either, except in the "punishment" category – where it statistically ties China.

Another suggestion might be to compare countries that have similarly authoritarian regimes and are about as rich as China. To run this analysis, I compared China to Jordan, Egypt and Belarus. China, Egypt and Jordan all score similarly on the Freedom House rankings as "not free", and with the exception of Egypt – which is a bit poorer – all these countries have similar per capita GDPs in the five to seven thousand USD per year range. Using an ANOVA with Bonferroni correction, none of these countries show meaningfully different levels of reported punishment for scandals, except for the comparisons between China and Egypt and between China and Jordan. Here, China scores as more willing to punish exposed wrongdoers than either Egypt or Jordan (at the $p<0.1$ threshold of statistical significance, with full results available from author on request). These results demonstrate that state response to scandals does not correlate to regime type, levels of democratization or national wealth. In other words, even though it is clearly authoritarian, China shows surprising nimbleness in appeasing public anger over revealed scandals.

Why the CCP Responds to Public Pressure

Given these results and the dozens of cases of media and internet pressure forcing policy or personnel changes, the real mystery is not whether powerful Chinese officials respond to mass demands but why they do so. Much of the party-state's responsiveness is seemingly based in a fear of the public's response to official inaction (Distelhorst 2012). The cover story of a 2009 issue of the news magazine *Zhongguo Baodao* (中国报道, *China Report*) captures this sense of official worry, with a headline proclaiming "Netizens are three feet above our heads" and wondering whether "the internet brings forth popular will and the popular voice, or whether it brings hidden dangers". The accompanying picture, with officials in imperial-style court dress engaged in an apparently worried discussion over a computer, reinforces the point (Wang et al. 2009).

For Chinese officialdom, it seems the "hidden dangers" are often more apparent than the benefits of bringing forth "popular will". Liu Chang (2012), for example, cites a survey in which 88 per cent of regular netizens think that the internet is overall a "good thing, prov-

ing social progress" – at the same time as 70 per cent of public officials have "internet terror" (网络恐惧, *wangluo kongju*). Another Chinese study on the rise of the internet, and of China's Twitter-like microblogging services in particular, showcases similar official worry. Writing from the viewpoint of Chinese officials, Kan Daoyuan (2010) finds that because microblogs sap the CCP's ability to direct and control public opinion, these services act as a potent threat to "social stability". If information is allowed to flow unchecked, Kan argues, then "rumours" will be much more likely to lead to "mass events" and other forms of social chaos (Kan 2010: 15). These and other studies suggest a culture in which Chinese officials, especially those at lower levels of government, are fearful of China's internet public opinion, which can serve as an "alarm system" for pointing out problems to higher-ups (Lorentzen 2014). Responsiveness, then, does not happen for its own sake, but is seen by many officials as a means to preserve stability and prevent problems from getting out of hand.

Note that I am not arguing that China is particularly effective at combating corruption or very pro-active in pursuing cases of official malfeasance. Most official corruption in China surely goes unpunished, and evidence is strong that corruption is systemic even at the highest levels of the party-state (Barboza 2012). But when such cases are uncovered and appear before the public eye, authorities generally act very quickly to punish those targeted by popular pressure.

Implications of China's Responsive Government

From one perspective, the CCP's sprightly response to public opinion – especially online – is a boon to many of China's citizens. As in any country, China faces a host of social problems that power holders are either unwilling or unable to tackle. The powerful nexus of an increasingly aggressive media (within limits) and mobilized public opinion has forced reluctant officials to confront problems ranging from official corruption, to choking pollution, poisonous food, an inadequate legal system, worker exploitation and other social ills. The result, when coupled with other practices like allowing citizens to sue the state, "an increasing use of People's Congresses to discuss policy", along with "the acceptance of some kinds of autonomous civil society organizations" – admittedly in a regime with "no apparent

interest in regime-level democratization" – has led He Baogang and M. Warren (2011: 269) and others to see China as an emerging example of "deliberative authoritarianism" (He 2006; He and Warren 2011; Jiang 2010).

This optimistic perspective sees the CCP's increasing engagement with citizens as both helping to solve festering social problems and increasing overall regime effectiveness. He and Warren (2011: 280) write that "deliberation may simply function more effectively to maintain order, generate information and produce legitimate decisions" than a commandist approach. For the CCP, of course, the key word is "legitimate". "Within a context in which ideological sources are fading while development-oriented policies create winners and losers", they write, "deliberative processes", including internet discussion, "can generate *legitimacy*" – legitimacy which might help the CCP stay in power (He and Warren 2011: 282, emphasis in original). Although acknowledging that the regime is responding to public pressure for its own selfish reasons, this perspective argues that most Chinese citizens are still better off living in a country that takes public demands seriously.

For the victims of the Wenzhou train crash, for the relatives of those hurt by Li Qiming, for the family of Sun Zhigang, the CCP's increasing responsiveness has been an unalloyed blessing. And indeed, it is hard to object to the punishment of corrupt officials, the opening of government records, and other small signs that the regime is willing to look beyond coercion as the solution to all social problems.

Chinese Government Responsiveness: A Double-Edged Sword

But a hidden trap might lurk in the party's increasing willingness to bend to public compulsion. First, and most importantly, the "commentariat" – those who read newspapers and internet discussion topics, stay up to date on public affairs and comment on microblogging sites – is not coterminous with China's citizenry. For one thing, although China had an estimated 632 million netizens in July 2014, this impressive group still represents less than 47 per cent of China's population (CNNIC 2014). The major barriers preventing the remaining 800 million people from entering the online fray are either

technical (no knowledge of computer use or a fear that they are "too old") or financial (internet use fees or lack of a computer/web-capable mobile phone). Only 11.6 per cent of those who do not use the internet claim to be uninterested in doing so, meaning that most of the non-netizens are probably kept informed by TV, radio and newspapers (CNNIC 2012). And even the traditional media do a relatively poor job of providing coverage in Western China and other less developed parts of the country (Stockmann 2013). Although these non-internet users may well be able to keep up to date on national affairs, they have virtually no way to participate in public discussion.

And those who do participate online are hardly representative of the general Chinese population, being younger, more urban, better educated, more male, and richer than average. For example, internet users are estimated to be 55.6 per cent male (compared with 51 per cent of China's population), with an average age of 19.9 (compared to an estimated 37.9 for China as a whole). Urban residents, comprising less than half of the national population, make up 71.8 per cent of China's netizens. And in a country where only 8.9 per cent of the population has some university education (including those who do not finish), the fact that 10.7 per cent of netizens have completed at least an undergraduate degree is telling. Meanwhile, more than 70 per cent of netizens earn at least the 2009 national average wage of about 1,400 CNY/month (224 USD), even though nearly 30 per cent of them are current students who likely have very low incomes (Netizen data from CNNIC 2012, 2014. Data on China's average age estimated from National Bureau of Statistics of China 2010. Sex composition and educational attainment data from National Bureau of Statistics of China 2012).

Microblogging, called *weibo* (微博) in Chinese, seems to be a particularly influential medium for influencing government action. The Wenzhou train crash, discussed above, was first broken on *weibo*, as were dozens of other influential cases of citizen-led activism in recent years (Michelle and Uking 2011). But *weibo* users are more demographically skewed toward the social and economic elites than even other netizens, according to a stratified random survey (N=705) of *Sina Weibo* users conducted in August 2013. *Sina Weibo* is the largest of China's *weibo* services and serves as a stand-in for all microblogging in China. The survey was administered by a commercial survey firm, oversampling active users – those who post at least seven times a

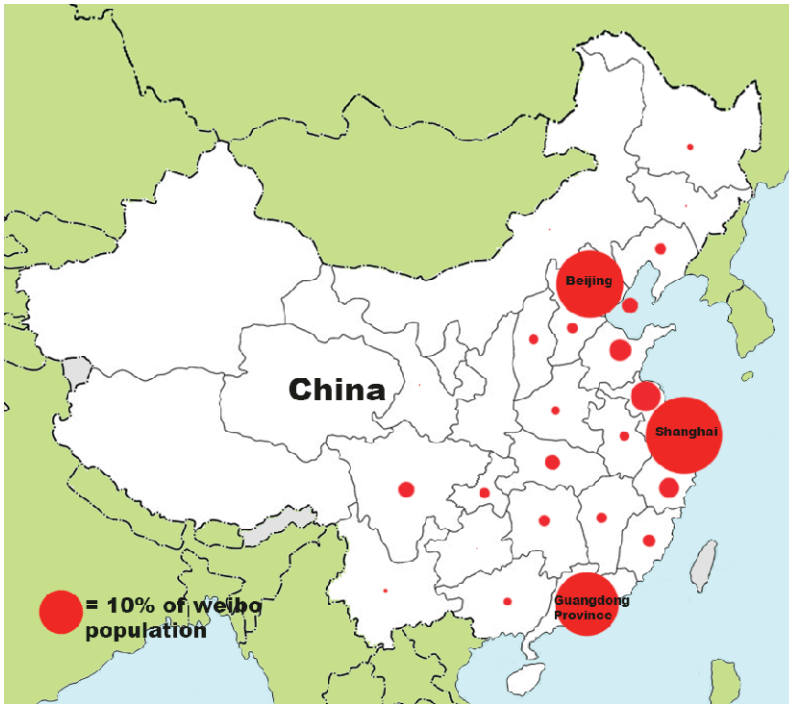
week. Potential participants were randomly selected and contacted directly through *Sina Weibo* itself, with an overall response rate of 11 per cent (7.7 per cent complete and valid). This is low by the standards of traditional offline surveys but broadly in line with online research in other countries (Kaplowitz, Hadlock, and Levine 2004).

The elite bias of Chinese microbloggers is especially apparent in their geographic concentration, with fully 47 per cent of all *Sina Weibo* users concentrated in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong Province – the three richest areas of China. Inland areas are hardly represented at all, and this situation has not much improved since 2011 research found similar (but even larger) findings of geographic concentration (Hassid 2011). Figure 1 provides a visual representation of where *weibo* users live in China; note especially how Western China is almost entirely bereft of microbloggers despite climbing internet penetration rates in the region. Surveyed *weibo* users are also far richer and more professionally oriented than ordinary Chinese citizens, with an average monthly income of 6,050 CNY compared to 3,000 CNY for ordinary netizens and a mere 1,400 CNY for the average Chinese citizen. The high income of surveyed *weibo* users is hard to overstate; less than 10 per cent of the sample had incomes below 2,500 CNY/month, an amount already more than 175 per cent of the national average. *Weibo* users are also far more professionally oriented than even China's (already elite) netizens, with more than 50 per cent in "professional" jobs, compared to 20 per cent of netizens and a far smaller percentage of ordinary citizens (CNNIC 2012, 2014; National Bureau of Statistics of China 2010, 2012).

The fact that China's netizens represent a relatively elite slice of the national population is not itself troubling, but it does suggest that internet users and commentators have been relative economic and social "winners". As such, the issues the commentariat brings to government attention are likely to be biased against those who need the most help. In a 2004 example, workers in one Chongqing factory decided that going on strike was the only way to prevent the sale of their employer to a lowball bidder. These savvy factory hands, knowing that mobilizing the media and public opinion was perhaps their only route to success, organized a journalists' seminar the day before the planned strike. Despite the seminar and preparation of a written press release, however, "there was no mainstream media response and little internet mobilization on behalf of workers". Media scholar

Zhao Yuezhi asserts that the lack of public response was due to bias among journalists, who create the same "superficial, manipulated and one-sided research and analysis that have contributed to a policy-formation process detrimental to the interests of workers" (Zhao 2008: 311). Moreover, Zhao argues, the news media "are the main channels of propaganda for government officials and factory managers, and they play a major role in amplifying neoliberal reform ideas" (Zhao 2008: 311). Internet commentators are often just as biased against poorer workers.

Figure 1: Geographic Location of Surveyed *Sina Weibo* Users (N=705)



Source: Author survey (August 2013).

If Sun Zhigang, the graphic designer beaten to death in police custody in 2003, were a more typical migrant worker, it is unlikely that his case would have garnered any attention at all from the internet or mainstream media. By official figures, over one million Chinese citi-

zens, mostly poor migrant workers, were detained each year in the early 2000s, with "abysmal living conditions, beatings, sexual abuse and deaths" being commonplace (Hand 2006: 120–121). Yet none of the earlier deaths attracted the same kind of media and internet attention as Sun's, and his death was seen as potentially threatening to the very sort of people who were likely to be online (especially in 2003). Despite the fact that *Nanfang Dushibao* asked, "In the state apparatus of a great country, who is not a nobody? […] Who is not an ordinary citizen?" (Hand 2006: 122), if Sun were a "nobody" rather than a white-collar university graduate, his death would most likely have passed unnoticed.

A further worry is that CCP responsiveness to public pressure will undermine recent attempts to build a more powerful and independent Chinese judiciary – albeit one within circumscribed limits. Since the reform era began, the CCP has made fitful progress in improving the quality of the Chinese legal system. A major push began in the aftermath of the Fifteenth Party Congress in 1999, when the Supreme People's Court (SPC) issued a blueprint for legal reform, calling for a "fair, open, highly effective, honest and well-functioning" judiciary (Gechlick 2005: 98), apparently for the first time since the 1949 founding of the People's Republic (Zhang 2003: 71). Among other reforms, the SPC has required since 2002 that "new judges [be] required to be university graduates and to pass the difficult national bar exam (which has a pass rate of about ten per cent)", a reform which has resulted in increasing the number of university-qualified judges from 12 per cent in 1995 to more than 50 per cent just ten years later (Liebman and Wu 2007: 267).

This is not to say that China has created a Western-style independent judiciary. Major political cases are still decided in consultation with CCP functionaries, and their pre-ordained verdicts are rarely in doubt. The current president of the SPC has reaffirmed party supremacy over the court system, noting that judicial power "is a significant way for the party and the people under its leadership to administer state and social affairs" (Hou and Keith 2012: 63, quoting SPC President Wang Shengjun). Nonetheless, for most day-to-day cases, judges have increasing latitude in adjudicating according to the merits of a case. Judges are even able to rule on potentially sensitive environmental cases with a degree of judicial professionalism, though this autonomy often depends on the local situation (Stern 2010). As

Zhu Suli, the former head of the Peking University Law School, puts it,

> the party's influence is "ubiquitous at every level and in every aspect of contemporary Chinese society", but […] its influence on the judiciary is "general and diffuse" (Hou and Keith 2012: 63, quoting Zu Suli).

The result is a system that more Chinese and even foreign companies see as increasingly non-partisan and fair, especially in regard to commercial cases (Peerenboom 2010). Recent years have seen a partial "turn against the law", where judges have been encouraged to mediate rather than litigate, and in the context of which a "suspicion of lawyers has risen" (Minzner 2011: 936). Eva Pils has similarly seen an "increasing number of repressive strikes against human rights lawyers, petitioners" and others as the CCP partially backtracks from its earlier legal reforms (Pils 2009: 141). The CCP's reduced emphasis on law in recent years, however, still allows far more judicial autonomy and professionalism than in the early years of the reform era, and as Minzner notes, "There is still some (albeit reduced) room for progressive institutional reform in China under the 'rule of law' rubric" (Minzner 2011: 937).

The party-state's susceptibility to public pressure, however, can sometimes undermine progress toward a more professional judiciary. While the power of the internet can promote justice – as in the case of She Xianglin, freed by internet pressure after being wrongly convicted of murdering his wife (Liebman and Wu 2007: 275) – it can also easily distort China's fragile judicial gains. Writing about the Maoist era, Sumei Hou and Ronald Keith write that "undue subscription to due process was easily conceived as throwing water on the masses who demanded justice", but a similar dynamic persists today when public demands for accountability become overwhelming (Hou and Keith 2012: 67).

One of the most ominous cases involves the trial (and retrial) of admitted Shenyang mob boss Liu Yong. In 2003, Liu was convicted by the Liaoning court system of "a range of crimes, including organizing a criminal syndicate, bribery and illegal possession of firearms" and sentenced to death. After two appeals, however, the Liaoning High People's Court vacated the execution order and sentenced him to lifetime imprisonment. "One reason for the reduction", legal scholars Benjamin Liebman and Tim Wu write, "was the fact that

Liu's confession had been obtained through torture" (Liebman and Wu 2007: 283). After *Bund Pictorial*, a Shanghai news magazine, questioned the commutation of Liu's sentence, "Web discussion forums filled with angry commentary, denouncing Liu's 'lenient' treatment" (Liebman and Wu 2007: 283). Goaded by public pressure, the SPC quickly invoked a never-before-used rule and sentenced Liu to death (*People's Daily* 2003). The sentence was carried out the same day (Liebman and Wu 2007: 283).

And the Liu Yong case is not unique. During the 2002 trial of Zhang Jinzhou, an official at a state-owned construction company on trial for economic crimes, the media repeatedly called Jiang a "criminal" before his conviction, and "at least one newspaper ran a headline stating that 'execution will be too light a punishment'" (Liebman 2005: 72). A similar story in 1997 ended with the court's conclusion that if the defendant were not killed, "it would not be enough to assuage popular rage" (Liebman 2005: 71). Needless to say, the defendants in both cases were quickly executed.

This and other cases demonstrate the potential danger of CCP responsiveness. As Susan Shirk writes,

> The elite's extreme nervousness about potential protests makes them highly responsive when the media report on a problem […]. Once the media publicize an issue and the issue becomes common knowledge, then the government does not dare ignore it (Shirk 2011: 17).

If a case becomes enough of a *cause célèbre*, party authorities are apparently willing to ignore established rules and procedures and instead turn to rough and ready judgement to appease popular anger.

Conclusion

Despite its authoritarian bent, the Chinese party-state is surprisingly responsive to public demands when the clamour for change becomes loud enough – especially when the internet is involved. A typical pattern involves a newspaper reporter finding about a potential scandal on the internet, either by chance or because netizens increasingly funnel story tips to journalists online. After publication in a newspaper, the story attracts much greater attention online, prompting further stories in the mainstream press and even more internet commentary. Eventually the pressure reaches a tipping point, forcing

Chinese officials to act to avoid social instability. In the short to medium term, such responsiveness keeps social tensions from building too high, as on most issues the CCP reacts decisively to assuage public anger before the people can take to the streets (Hassid 2012).

This responsiveness can have salutary effects, improving the quality of governance, preserving stability and helping central authorities learn about local problems that would otherwise be hidden from Beijing's view. And Beijing seems serious about uncovering local problems. In May 2008, for example, the party-state initiated regulations (the "Open Government Regulations" or 政府信息公开条例, *Zhengfu Xinxi Gongkai Tiaoli*) forcing local authorities to release more government information in an effort to improve transparency across the country. Although few local governments had met even the basic legal requirements years later (Lorentzen, Landry, and Yasuda 2010; Distelhorst 2014), the effort demonstrated that there is at least some support in the CCP for increasing the flow of information and, presumably, bettering the quality of governance. After all, if Beijing can learn about problems early, scandals – and subsequent public pressure on the CCP – can be prevented.

But this responsiveness also presents hidden dangers. First, the online commentariat is not synonymous with China's population as a whole. Having a distinct bias toward urban, rich, well-educated males, the online community may well advocate for issues that help them, the relative "winners", at the expense of other segments of society. This bias is especially prevalent among China's microbloggers, who represent an online "super-elite" with an overwhelming professional orientation and more than four times the monthly income of the average Chinese citizen. Such opinion makers are generally far more interested in their own concerns than the plight of the rural (and urban) underclass. For example, although the death of Sun Zhigang was tragic, countless other migrant worker deaths in custody before his had failed to garner much public attention. It is the fact that he was a member of the university-educated elite, rather than his death in particular, that helped spawn the massive public outcry. Given netizens' bias toward those already relatively well off, CCP responsiveness to public opinion may exacerbate, rather than help, China's growing social inequality and promote short-term, urban-oriented solutions at the cost of long-term stability. If the attention of senior officials to local problems is limited, any increased attention to the

problems of elite urban netizens might come at the expense of rural residents – residents who already protest more than 100,000 times a year (*China Labor Bulletin* 2009).

And second, there is a danger that the CCP may undermine its own nascent efforts to build an effective, competent judiciary. Legitimacy is, in part, derived from procedural fairness, and if officials are seen to bow to mob justice, people's trust in the system may suffer in the long run (Tyler and Fagan 2008; Sullivan 2013). Although China has made some progress toward establishing a competent, neutral judiciary, these gains are still fragile. For a system already suffering from what Thomas Friedman calls a "huge trust deficit", the end result might be dire indeed (Friedman 2012).

Although this paper has sketched out the CCP's surprising responsiveness to public pressure and examined some of the positive and negative ramifications of this trend, future research is needed in a number of areas. For one, it is still unknown why authorities decide to allow discussion on some sensitive topics while ruthlessly censoring others. Direct criticism of high-level leaders is clearly not allowed, and recent research has indicated that the CCP is most vigilant about controlling potential organizational threats (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). Beyond these broad parameters, however, the mechanisms of general state response to potentially sensitive topics are quite murky. On a related note, it is unclear why some (potential) scandals capture public attention while others disappear without a trace. Perhaps there is some common element to those scandals that capture public attention? And finally, future research should examine how the changing demographics of China's internet users might affect the dynamics outlined above. As the average netizen becomes more similar to the average Chinese citizen, it is possible that in time the system will become more responsive to all, rather than just a lucky few. Until that happens, party-state responsiveness to an unaccountable online elite might slowly increase China's potential for instability, especially if attention to the concerns of rich, coastal internet users redirects official attention from the increasingly troubled plight of rural residents.

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Appendix

The prison category counted the following words and stems:

"hard labour", "imprison*", "incarcerate*", "jail*", "prison*", "re-educat*", "reeducat*" and "sentenced". Punishment measured: "demoted", "execute", "executed", "fined", "fired", "punish*" and "stripped". Judiciary measured: "appeal", "appellate", "attorney(s)", "barrister(s)", "charged", "court(s)", "defendant(s)", "indict*", "judge(s)", "lawyer(s)", "magistrate(s)", "plaintiff(s)", "procurator*", "prosecut*", "solicitor(s)", "trial(s)", "tribunal(s)".

The asterisk indicates a "wild-card" search that allows any terms. For example, a search for "jail*" would get results that included the terms "jail", "jailing", "jailer", "jailed" and "jails", while a search for "procurator*" would include "procurator", "procurators" and "procuratorate".

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Winning Hearts and Minds? Cadres as Microbloggers in China

Ashley ESAREY

Abstract: China's local governments are facing a crisis of public confidence and have struggled to handle political dissent and popular protests. In an attempt to promote political stability, local officials around the country have utilized Twitter-like microblog sites (微博, *weibo*) to upgrade their capability to influence citizens and engage in rapid information management. Through the analysis of microblogging by prominent propagandists whose identities and professions are known to the public, this article finds some evidence that microblogging could be helping cadres to win hearts and minds, although such microblogging poses new risks to the state as netizens challenge propagandists and state policies in exchanges that reveal political pluralism and disapproval of state policies. While venting on *weibo* may enable people to blow off steam, the reluctance (or inability) of official microbloggers to engage their critics in meaningful dialogue suggests the limited utility of official microblogging as a means of furthering political stability through the improvement of state–society relations.

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Keywords: China, propaganda, political stability, *weibo*, dissent

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Introduction

Since the demise of Mao Zedong's radical policies, China's rulers have embarked upon a range of political reforms that have been identified by political scientists as "adaptive governance", "adaptive authoritarianism" or "authoritarian resilience" (Heilmann and Perry 2011; Chen 2010; Nathan 2003). Central to these conceptions is the notion that the Chinese regime has responded to a host of challenges and potential causes of regime instability by remaking political institutions to enable the party-state to govern more effectively and win greater popular support. Scholars of Chinese politics in the Reform Era (1978–present) have emphasized the linkage between economic reforms and political stability (Yang 2004; Tsai 2007). Studies have identified the ways in which the party-state has sought to improve state–society relations through such initiatives as the promotion of elections at the village level, the induction of business elites into the ranks of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and local legislatures (Dickson 2003; Chen and Dickson 2010) and the accommodation of limited forms of protest (Chen 2011). True to its Leninist origins, the Chinese party-state has undertaken a series of measures to maintain its ability to influence public opinion by providing market incentives for mass media to comply with censorship guidelines (Esarey 2005), creating an environment of restrictive uncertainty among investigative journalists (Hassid 2008), repackaging propaganda for more discriminating audiences (Brady 2008; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011) and covertly promoting "politically correct" commentary online (Hung 2010; Han 2013). The embrace of *zhengwu weibo* (政务微博) – microblogging by officials and state institutions – represents another major innovation to promote political stability through state participation in internet forums, where the regime's agenda-setting capacity has diminished relative to mass media (Esarey and Xiao 2011: 312).

Can official microblogging contribute to political stability where other reform measures have failed? Or, is it possible that extending the reach of the party-state into online spaces that are relatively free of propaganda could backfire? In order to examine the activities of official microbloggers, this study analyses three microblogs maintained by prominent Propaganda Department officials. First, it utilizes content analysis to evaluate the extent to which provincial-level officials "market dictatorship" via commentary that is designed to shape public values and perspectives on the regime (Brady 2008). The

practice of *zhengwu weibo* is thus explored as a new variant of state propaganda, which is defined as communication designed to inform or educate citizens in order to guide their thoughts and actions and elevate support for the regime. Second, as a way of assessing possible changes in state–society relations, the article considers the extent to which official microbloggers encounter resistance from China's rambunctious and even "uncivil" internet users. Third, the paper evaluates the ways in which propagandists handle pushback as a means of gaining insights into the capability of cadres to utilize *weibo* as well as the potential persuasiveness of their messaging. Finally, the study contributes to existing research that treats Chinese government behaviour affecting internet content, whether propaganda or censorship, as a means of assessing state preferences concerning the maintenance of political stability and one-party rule (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Noesselt 2013; Esarey and Xiao 2014).

Soft-Sell Hypothesis

The above objectives led to the testing of three hypotheses that emerge out of scholarship on the internet and governance in China. While in the Mao period Chinese propaganda work was characterized by overt appeals to mass audiences based on "one-size-fits-all approaches", propaganda in the Dengist Reform Era has become more nuanced and even covert, with the rise of public service advertising (公益广告, *gongyi guanggao*) and anonymous "fifty-cent army" commentators guiding public opinion online (Stockmann 2011; Han 2013; Yang 2012: 290). Thus, it is hypothesized that official microbloggers will emphasize positive elements of CCP rule in an effort to boost popular perception of the regime's performance and highlight the potential for citizens to find happiness, prosperity or personal fulfilment in status-quo China. Yet these propaganda efforts will be subtle, eschewing overt references to regime ideology and to what Perry Link calls "official language" to avoid a backlash from youthful readers who disapprove of bureaucratese in cyberspace (Link 2013: 243–260). Official microblog postings will also be leavened with non-political, cultural and personal subject matter to make their content more appealing to readers. The hypothesis (H1) that *zhengwu weibo* will emphasize a positive view of the political status quo, feature subtle efforts to influence public opinion, articulate positions in common language and contain a mixture of political and non-political content

is referred to in shorthand as the "soft sell". The identification of related posts by official microbloggers will be seen as corroboration of this hypothesis, with falsification associated with the absence of characteristics outlined above.

Pushback Hypothesis

The study further hypothesizes (H2) that despite a cautious approach to propaganda work, cadres' microblogging will result in challenges by other users. China's youthful internet users are known for venting frustration over the rising cost of living, perceived absence of economic opportunities, political corruption and environmental pollution; these passions could readily be directed against official microbloggers (Yang and Zheng 2012; Szablewicz 2014). The main drivers of what will be called the "pushback" hypothesis are what Yang Guobin has called a "culture of contention" among netizens; suspicion about the political motivations of cadres; and the view that *zhengwu weibo* posts, like those of other internet commentators, are legitimate subjects of discussion, contention or even derision (Yang 2009: 14). Determining whether or not netizens choose to contest cadres' assertions via *weibo* is necessary for making tentative assessments concerning the potential of "propaganda 2.0" to induce greater political stability. The hypothesis will be seen as corroborated through the identification of public responses to posts by official microbloggers that contest their claims, meaning or intentions, with falsification associated with the absence of pushback related to cadres' commentary.

Failure-to-Interact Hypothesis

The *weibo* medium is dynamic and highly interactive, as compared to the print and television media that have long been mainstays of CCP propaganda. If official microbloggers elicit responses from the public, controversial or otherwise, but fail to address criticism or attempt to persuade readers through interaction with other users, it is probable that official microblogging will be of limited utility for advancing the regime's larger goals of elevating popular support and fostering political stability, although it is possible that *weibo* may help cadres to better gauge public opinion. Unresponsiveness or the failure to interact is likely to leave netizens with the impression that cadres are "aliens"

in the *weibo* medium and out of sync with contemporary internet culture.

While in recent years the CCP has become more responsive to public pressure, officials are primarily accountable to their higher-ups, who determine an individual's prospects for promotion in China's nomenklatura system (Kung and Chen 2011: 31; Yang, Xu, and Tao 2014: 865; Fewsmith 2011: 292). Moreover, as *zhengwu weibo* is a relatively new form of political communication and as cadres are accustomed to top-down communication with the public, official microbloggers are unlikely to engage citizens in free-wheeling and highly interactive conversations. Therefore, this study hypothesizes (H3) that official microbloggers will infrequently interact with the public on *weibo*. In shorthand, this hypothesis will be referred to as "failure to interact". The absence of frequent interaction between official microbloggers and their readers will be treated as corroboration of failure to interact, with falsification associated with substantial evidence of interaction.

The Rise of Microblogs

The rapid proliferation of internet use in China has provided 650 million Chinese unprecedented opportunities for political expression and dramatically reduced barriers for organizing collective action, thereby posing a threat to the authoritarian regime and forcing the state to try harder to censor information. The fact that over 80 per cent of Chinese internet users access the web via cell phones has also contributed to the popularity of microblogging, a medium that allows more than 275 million Chinese to share information, photos, music and videos with their online communities (CNNIC 2014). Although *weibo* sites resemble Twitter, they evince important differences concerning the creation and circulation of user content (Svensson 2014: 172). To a greater extent than on Twitter, the content-based conversation threads of *weibo* can enable a single comment to snowball into a highly interactive conversation involving a local, national or even international audience unless action is taken by a corporate or state entity to suppress content seen as threatening to stability, morally unacceptable or conducive to social mobilization.

Microblogs have been associated with public outcry in response to abuses of power by officials or their children (Sullivan 2013: 7);

breaking stories ahead of mass media; and pushback against censorship by journalists (Repnikova 2014: 125–126). The decisions of Chinese elite increasingly reflect public opinion expressed online in order to take steps to improve governance and legitimacy (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013: 340; Noesselt 2013: 6; Sullivan 2013: 8).

Although Chinese communication scholars hailed 2010 as the breakthrough year for microblogging, shortly thereafter local governments across the country launched a major drive to encourage the creation of *zhengwu weibo* or "official microblogs". In late 2011, the Deputy Director of the CCP's Central Propaganda Department, Wang Chen, was quoted by Chinese media as exhorting local cadres to effectively use the *weibo* medium and "to occupy these strategic spaces in the interest of developing a healthy and uplifting internet culture" (*Nanfang Ribao* 2011; Schlaeger and Jiang 2014: 190). As of late 2012, government institutions hosted well over 100,000 microblogs; individual Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cadres and state employees ran more than 50,000 *weibo* sites on China's two largest major microblog service provider platforms (People's Daily Online Public Opinion Center 2012a: 16, 2012b: 14). Institutional *weibo* sites ranged from those maintained by the State Council and the Foreign Ministry to provincial CCP Youth Leagues and municipal police departments. Some official microbloggers have attracted very large audiences. As of December 2012, China's top official microblogger, Cai Qi, the Director of the CCP Organization Department in Zhejiang Province, had an audience in excess of eight million, or more than four times the official circulation of the popular Guangdong-based newspaper, *Nanfang Zhoumo* (南方周末, *Southern Weekly*) (People's Daily Online Public Opinion Center 2012b: 42; *Nanfang Baoyewang* 2012).

Central-level political support for official microblogging has been associated with the decision released after the Sixth Plenum of the 17th Chinese Communist Party Congress in October 2011. The decision called for the "development of a healthy online culture", "strengthening the guidance of public opinion online", "promoting the ideology and culture of the main melody" and "strengthening the management of social media online and the tools of rapid information dissemination" (*Xinhua* 2011). An examination of the dates on which official microblogging sites were established, however, suggests that many local governments had already embraced the idea well in

advance of the Sixth Plenum, and that the Sixth Plenum decision represented the encouragement of ongoing developments.

To grasp the motivation of local cadres to embrace microblogging, it is crucial understand the extent to which grassroots unrest makes local cadres feel vulnerable. Many factors have contributed to the crisis of confidence in the local state in the Reform Era. The size and indebtedness of local governments grew rapidly in the 1990s, giving rise to predatory forms of taxation and land seizures to raise funds for state coffers (Cai 2010: 72–73; Bernstein and Lü 2003). Protests of various types have risen steadily. Under the "responsibility system" (责任追究制, *zeren zhuijiuzhi*), local cadres are evaluated for promotion by their superiors in terms of their ability maintain social order (Feng 2013: 5). Moreover, the frequent transfer of officials weakens their ties to local communities (Fewsmith 2011: 271; Yu 2003).

As political scientist Jae Ho Chung has observed,

> maintaining stability and ensuring survival are the principal goals of any political regime. China is no exception, regardless of whether its rulers were emperors, generalissimos or general secretaries (Chung 2011: 297).

The CCP-led central government has backed a number of initiatives to improve the public's perception of the local state, including the introduction of village elections, the restriction of local governments' taxation power, the prosecution of corrupt officials and the solicitation of input from citizens and social groups. Despite these efforts, opinion polls indicate trust in local government is lower than trust in central government (Shi 2008: 228); a prominent study of rural Chinese politics suggests the local state is frequently the target of protesters appealing to the central government to protect their legal rights (O'Brien and Li 2006).

For local officials whose prospects for promotion are affected by the political stability in the administrative areas they oversee, the use of *weibo* as a tool to improve governance and guide public opinion has considerable appeal. The *2011 Official Microblogger Evaluative Report* noted that political microblogs are crucial platforms for improving government transparency, public service and the understanding of public opinion (National E-Government Research Center 2012). A study that encouraged local officials to start *weibo* sites, the "Tengxun Report on Microblogging in Zhejiang", praises political microblogs as

a mechanism for improving guidance of news and public opinion, enabling officials to hear the voices of citizens, permitting officials to rapidly understand people's demands, solidifying the government's image, increasing interaction with citizens, improving state–society communication and encouraging political participation by social groups (*Tengxun* 2011). Microblogging service providers have also courted officials as users in order to increase traffic and to provide microblogging sites with a measure of protection against government-mandated shutdowns, such as the one that proved devastating to China's first popular microblog site, Fanfou.com (饭否), on 7 July 2009. In short, there are many reasons for local officials to view official microblogging as potentially helpful to improving state–society relations, contributing to political stability and elevating cadres' prospects of promotion to higher office. Yet the challenge of utilizing the fast-moving and contentious *weibo* medium is considerable.

Research Methods

To investigate the uses of political microblogging as a mechanism for improving propaganda work, maintaining stability through the guidance of public opinion, promoting state–society dialogue and even mollifying angry citizens, three microblog sites maintained by provincial-level cadres were selected for analysis. The microbloggers were Zhang Jianhua, Hu Jian and Lü Huanbin, each of whom held the position of Deputy Director of Operations (常务副部长, *changwu fubuzhang*) in the Propaganda Department of the CCP in Jiangsu Province, Zhejiang Province and the provincial-level Xinjiang Autonomous Region, respectively. The "2011 China Governmental Microblogging Evaluative Report" rated Zhang, Lü and Hu among China's top 100 official microbloggers. As of August 2012, Zhang Jianhua's site listed his audience at nearly 1.7 million; Lü Huanbin had an audience over 426,000; Hu Jian, the most prolific writer of the three, had more than 355,000 followers. From the government's perspective, these microbloggers represent the vanguard of a new type of propagandist: They were senior propaganda workers who possessed a nuanced grasp of CCP ideology and had the capacity to reach large audiences of internet users. While other scholars have examined *weibo* maintained by state institutions, this is one of the first empirical stud-

ies focusing on *weibo* maintained by prominent CCP cadres (Schlaeger and Jiang 2014: 193; National E-Government Research Center 2012).

One month of microblogging content for the sites maintained by Zhang, Lü and Hu was randomly selected for content analysis. In addition, copious tweets before and after the sample month (August 2011) were read in order to place the commentary of these microbloggers into a broader context. The primary research method was content analysis. In August 2012, a coding protocol was created, tested and implemented for sorting the sampled microblog content by main topic, time of posting, writer–audience interaction and the use of original or forwarded material, photos and videos. One concern with evaluating Chinese internet content one year after its initial posting is that government or corporate censors could have deleted content, contributing to selection bias. However, careful consideration of the microblog sites (where written notices and audience comments typically mention deletions) suggests that few posts had been deleted, including reader comments, although it remains possible that some material was removed from the sample prior to analysis. To eliminate intercoder reliability problems resulting from the evaluation of content by multiple human coders, the author accessed, read and evaluated every tweet posted during the selected month, with the unit of analysis as the individual *weibo* post. The official microblog content was thus entirely analysed by a single coder; no software was utilized. In addition, responses to posts were read to evaluate audience perceptions. Researchers interested in accessing the original Chinese-language posts and audience responses discussed below will find the URLs in the "References" section of the article.

Meet the Microbloggers

The three writers had above-average levels of education and were of similar ages but had been on different career trajectories prior to assuming their positions in the Propaganda Department, the branch of the CCP responsible for media control, political indoctrination and ideological guidance. Zhang Jianhua, 53, was born in Yixing Municipality, Jiangsu Province, and worked as a journalist and editor at *Yixing Daily* prior to studying at Fudan University's Journalism Department. He later served as the publisher of *Eastern Culture Weekly* (东方文化周刊, *Dongfang Wenhua Zhoukan*), a professor at the Nanjing Uni-

versity Graduate School of Journalism, Deputy Director of the Jiangsu Provincial Broadcasting Bureau, Director of the Jiangsu Provincial Television Station and Director of the Jiangsu Province Culture Office. Zhang held the last position alongside his post as Deputy Director of operations at the Propaganda Department (*Xinhua Baoyewang* 2009).

Lü Huanbin, 51, a native of Changsha, Hunan, received his bachelor's and master's degrees from Hunan Normal University. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Lü was a major player in Hunan Province's media scene, serving as Director of the Propaganda Centre at Hunan Economic Television, president of Hunan Economic Television, and vice-chairman of the Hunan provincial media group, Golden Eagle Broadcasting System. In March of 2011, he assumed the position of Deputy Director of Operations at the Xinjiang Autonomous Region's Propaganda Department (Zhou 2010).

Hu Jian, 55, was born in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province. Hu attended Zhejiang Sci-Tech University (浙江理工大学, *Zhejiang Ligong Daxue*), where he focused on silk manufacture. Hu later received his master's degree at the Central Party School in Beijing, worked in the Zhejiang Province CCP Organization Department and served as the editor-in-chief of the Organization Department's magazine, *Pioneers of the Times* (时代先锋, *Shidai Xianfeng*). Hu also headed the Organization Department in the Shaoxing Municipality and was Deputy Director of the Zhejiang Provincial Organization Department prior to transferring to the Propaganda Department as Deputy Director of Operations (*Tengxun Xinwen* 2013).

Zhang Jianhua, Lü Huanbin and Hu Jian all had distinguished careers in propaganda work prior to joining the ranks of the official microbloggers whose sites provide their real names and professional titles. The three writers had extensive prior experience in the media industry and were steeped in party ideology by virtue of their training, career trajectory and leadership roles, as of the time the study was conducted. Lü Huanbin had a distinguished media career in his home province before leaving, in the words of one of his *weibo* followers, to "defend the borders" in Xinjiang, a place to which Lü did not have a deep personal connection. Zhang and Hu lived in, and often tweeted about, life in their native provinces, a situation that may have made it easier for them to connect with audiences in Jiangsu and Zhejiang.

Content Analysis Results

After coding all 229 microblog posts written by Zhang, Lü and Hu in August of 2011, it was clear that there was substantial variation among the three in terms of their total number of postings, amount of author-generated material, topics emphasized, interactive use of the microblogging medium, direct interaction with their audiences, use of images and re-posting of content from other *weibo* or internet sites. These writers wrote mostly about non-political topics and seldom posted overtly political propaganda. Rather, they emphasized concepts and values tangentially related to the preservation or acceptance of the status quo. The public did question, criticize and debate the posts of official microbloggers; the official microbloggers seldom responded to this pushback. Only Hu Jian mentioned reader criticism of his ideas, and twice he even re-posted readers' caustic assertions along with his reply. Zhang's and Lü's use of the medium for interactive communication was very low, and in this sense differed from popular microbloggers, who often engage individual followers in public conversations. Overall, communication by Zhang, Hu and Lü was mostly unidirectional – from sender to receiver – in a manner characteristic of "traditional" media, such as television and newspapers, corroborating a key finding of a study on an institutional official microblog (Schlaeger and Jiang 2014: 200). On numerous occasions, members of the public asked the three cadres questions or commented on their posts. Zhang never responded to citizens' attempts to initiate a public dialogue; Lü interacted with his readers only three times and never addressed subjects of political sensitivity such as media freedom or Uyghur empowerment in Xinjiang. Nearly one-third of Hu Jian's posts were responses to supportive remarks by readers; the nature of his interaction online receives further consideration below.

Zhang Jianhua had the fewest posts during the period analysed, only 24 over the course of one month (see Table 1). All of Zhang's entries were original material (no re-tweets). More of Zhang's readers re-circulated his commentary than the followers of either Hu or Lü. Each of Zhang Jianhua's posts was re-tweeted an average of 32 times. This may seem surprising, as Zhang never responded to direct communication from readers and his posts did not contain a single photo or video. It bears noting that Zhang's readership was over three times the size of Lü Huanbin's or Hu Jian's; the higher rate at which

Zhang's commentaries were recirculated is not necessarily an indication that his writing was more popular among readers.

Table 1: Zhang Jianhua's Microblog

	Frequency
Original content	24
Prominent topics: • Lifestyle • Politics • Writing/microblogging • Family	 9 6 4 3
Re-posts material from other site	0
Responses to audience queries	0
Average number of audience re-posts	32
Post containing photo or video	0
Total posts	24
Microblog site URL	<www.weibo.com/u/1811891453>

Source: Authors' own compilation.
Note: Analysis period 3–31 August 2011.

Lü Huanbin posted more sporadically than Hu Jian, but Lü's postings (59, in total) usually appeared in rapid-fire succession. The majority of Lü Huanbin's posts were accompanied by photos and video clips depicting Xinjiang's natural scenery, art and sporting events. Each of his posts was re-circulated by an average of 21 readers (see Table 2).

Table 2: Lü Huanbin's Microblog

	Frequency
Original content	31
Prominent topics: • Art • Media industry • Nature/weather • Travel/tourism • Politics	 16 11 8 7 7
Re-posts material from other site	43

	Frequency
Responses to audience queries	3
Average number of audience re-posts	21
Post containing photo or video	40
Total posts	59
Microblog site URL	<www.weibo.com/bigbaozhen>

Source: Authors' own compilation.
Note: Analysis period 2–30 August 2011.

Table 3: Hu Jian's Microblog

	Frequency
Original content	127
Prominent topics: • Lifestyle • Social values • Education • Politics • Nature/weather	 30 26 14 13 11
Re-posts material from other site	95
Responses to audience queries	55
Average number of audience re-posts/ comments*	15
Post containing photo or video	43
Total posts	146
Microblog site URL**	<http://t.qq.com/hujianzj>

Source: Authors' own compilation.
Note: Analysis period 1–31 August 2011.
* Hu Jian used the Tengxun platform, which does not provide statistics differentiating between audience re-tweets and comments.
** Hyperlinks to Hu Jian's microblog posts from 2011 and his readers' replies are no longer available via his main site, although his more recent entries may be found via the hyperlink above. Hu's prior posts are accessible via links provided in the References section.

Hu Jian was the most prolific of the three microbloggers, posting material 146 times in a month. He wrote consistently, usually in the

early morning, early afternoon and evening, averaging 4.7 tweets per day. Hu's tweets were re-tweeted less frequently, on average, than the tweets of Zhang or Lü. Nearly one-third of Hu Jian's posts contained photos of flowers, ponds and curious architectural features, many of which were snapshots he took in daily life. Just 10 per cent of Hu's comments concerned politics, as compared to 25 per cent for Zhang Jianhua and 23 per cent for Lü Huanbin (see Table 3 for details).

(H1) Soft Sell of Values

Although these official microbloggers did not conceal their identities, they seldom mentioned their work for the Propaganda Department. The writers also rarely posted content that was clearly propaganda, or communication obviously designed to guide the political thinking or actions of citizens, boost compliance with state policies or deepen acceptance of specific components of regime ideology. Zhang, Lü and Hu avoided using official language and infrequently utilized their sites to announce government campaigns, events or initiatives. They gave political subjects less attention than non-political and relatively uncontroversial topics. Instead, Zhang, Lü and Hu shared personal anecdotes, lifestyle advice, memories from their youth, tips on education and commentary on natural beauty, and wrote of their artistic interests. Their commentary, in other words, softened their image as ranking cadres responsible for propaganda work. Frequently, their tweets blurred the boundary between official duties and private life, allowing the official microbloggers to tap into the vitality of the *weibo* user community in ways that formulaic official language would fail to achieve. Zhang Jianhua's announcement of his father's death, for example, prompted his highest single-tweet spike in audience comments (Zhang 2011a).

The frequency with which the official microbloggers posted non-political commentary, relative to political content, seemed to reflect a desire to put a human face on propaganda and ideological work. Through a subtle emphasis on the normative merit of China's political and social status quo, these microbloggers sought the public's empathy, acceptance and support. Moreover, their frequent use of *weibo* implied that connecting with younger citizens (the majority of users) is valued by ranking cadres in the propaganda system, who seek to influence citizens and presumably receive input from them as well. Posts made by Zhang, Hu and Lü sought to convince readers

that obtaining self-satisfaction was possible through the elevation of moral standards, diligence, education and thoughtful reflection on real-life experience – messages that were softly neo-Confucian in the sense that they implied everyone could find happiness through greater attention to self-improvement. The tone of most tweets was confident, encouraging, upbeat. Their messages were written in colloquial language (rather than the less accessible "party speak" that is standard fare at important CCP meetings) and could be quite creatively expressed. For example, Hu Jian wrote:

> On tentacles. The octopus has many tentacles. Every tentacle has many suction cups; the octopus has a high level of sensitivity and is the most intelligent creature in the sea […]. People need to have many suction cups like the octopus. They must broadly explore many areas and absorb the sources of knowledge and wisdom. To do so means they become broadly adaptable and discover opportunities for development everywhere, or they gather many types of knowledge and methods rooted in experience that can be immediately used. This requires travelling widely (Hu 2011e).

Hu Jian's creative comment was greeted enthusiastically by many readers, who re-tweeted the post or commented 222 times. A few hours later, Hu Jian re-tweeted the following response by Jiang Jian (蒋剑), implying that Hu approved of its message:

> When we are travelling, we should walk around more, look around more, paying attention to the details nearby. Then, we should collect our thoughts on the broader good; after some time, knowledge will come naturally. When our eyes open to the world, our thinking becomes more sensitive, and we will feel many things. This all requires going out to experience things ourselves. Whether this is good or bad, once is insufficient, requiring another time, until we learn grace and mirth, until we master courage and tolerance (Jiang 2011).

Jiang Jian's tweet was itself re-circulated or commented on 63 times.

In postings suggestive of the soft sell, Hu Jian urged his readers to consider the tremendous influence of *weibo* on their work and everyday lives and the importance of ideology as a source of guidance, asserting that people could achieve happiness through *weibo* use and a healthy and peaceful lifestyle (Hu 2011b, 2011c). Hu also wrote about such government successes as the implementation of the "spokesperson system" (发言人制度, *fayanren zhidu*) to regularly and rapidly dis-

seminate information (Hu 2011a). Similarly, Zhang Jianhua praised the effectiveness of government institutions in creating an equitable environment replete with opportunities for China's youth (Zhang 2011e) and voiced pleasure at the "freedom", "dynamism" and "simple beauty" of the opening ceremony at an athletic championship in Shenzhen (Zhang 2011c). Lü Huanbin lauded government plans to renovate a dilapidated district in Kashgar while maintaining its traditional charm (Lü 2011a) and wrote of a CCP committee meeting at which the subject of *naan* (a type of bread) was discussed as an area for development in the food industry (Lü 2011b). Messages such as these spoke of the promise for happiness in China and highlighted governmental actions to provide for the public's welfare, providing corroboration of the soft-sell hypothesis.

(H2) Pushback

The tendency of Zhang Jianhua, Lü Huanbin and Hu Jian to emphasize the positive and to avoid sensitive political topics did not prevent netizens from introducing controversy into conversations that responded to the cadres' tweets. Ostensibly non-political posts sparked startling pushback from audiences accustomed to interrogating online expression. Less than one month after the high-speed train collision in Wenzhou killed 40 people, Jiangsu Province's Zhang Jianhua wrote:

> The high-speed railway has reduced its speed. Because of this, I am thinking isn't it the case that in many other areas speed should also be reduced? The answer is absolutely. Moving at high speeds for a long period of time, so many things get compressed, it is very easy for problems to occur, even to flip a car [翻车, *fan che*]. Society is like this. Economics is like this. People are also like this (Zhang 2011d).

Thirty-four members of Zhang's audience re-tweeted this comment. Most responses were supportive calling Zhang "wise" or his tweet "good" or "moving". Philadelphia World (费城世界, Feicheng shijie) wrote: "Although many people have said this, when you, a person with this kind of status, says this, it really makes people respectful" (Feicheng shijie 2011). Others expressed scepticism or mentioned the high-speed railway's poor safety record. Zhouqianjin Baby (周千金 baby) wrote, "Yes, but is it easy to slow down?" (Zhouqianjin Baby

2011). Three minutes later, SamsGuo tweeted "The high-speed railway is like China's Great Leap Forward! Reflect on this!" (SamsGuo 2011).

A close reading of responses to commentary by official microbloggers indicated that readers commonly challenge their posts, as the pushback hypothesis (H2) asserts. Even rather innocuous tweets, including those suggestive of the soft sell, were contested, and conversations turned toward issues that were only tangentially related to the original message. Controversy courted each writer to varying degrees, as readers embraced, contested, lampooned and pontificated over tweets by the propagandists. Hu Jian's post on ideology (思想, *sixiang*) was re-tweeted or re-circulated or commented on by 533 members of his audience, revealing the maelstrom of responses to commentary by China's official microbloggers:

> On ideology. I don't know what the world would be like without ideology. Ideology guides action. Only when one thinks clearly can one act clearly. One's greatest fear is a high level of confusion. Ideology must prioritize science, not confused thinking and wild thoughts. It must prioritize standards and not calculate in the dark. It must prioritize methods, not lurch to the north and withdraw to the south. It must prioritize the exchange of ideas, not idiotic thoughts in the dark. The exchange of ideas adds value to ideology. Bringing ideology to microblogging is like a dandelion in the breeze. The seeds of ideology are broadcast great distances (Hu 2011c).

While not overtly political or directly related to the ruling party's ideology, Hu's comment was a subtle reference to the CCP's normative position on the role of ideology in Chinese society, which includes the belief that Sinified Marxism is scientific ideology that requires standardization to prevent confusion (Ji 2012: 100). Yang Yufeng's response suggested displeasure:

> If people who aren't moaning like a sick person or throwing tantrums can claim to have ideology, then everyone should just go to their mistress. There should be less wild thinking and more reflection on experience. Otherwise, as soon as people contemplate ideology God will laugh (Yang 2011).

Xixi Gongzhu (希西公主) took the conversation in a more intellectual direction: "The famous economist John Maynard Keynes said the

main driver of social transformation is not interests but ideology" (Xixi Gongzhu 2011). Sun Yanbo responded:

> Individuals have individual ideology, groups have group ideology, nations have national ideology; individual ideology can be distinguished between lifestyle attitudes, ideals and values; group and national ideologies are composed of individual ideologies and determine the direction of development for nations and groups (Sun 2011).

Wang Bin, whose site gave his title as the secretary of the party group (分团委书记, *fentuanwei shuji*) at Zhejiang University's College of Electrical Engineering, addressed the difficulty of transmitting ideology:

> Taking your own ideology and putting it into someone else's mind, serving as the source of guidance, you frequently have to consider how those who market ideals are brainwashing others in order to determine if their ideological work is really effective (Wang 2011).

Maocao responded to his remark sardonically, "Ideology is like underwear: You have to have it, but you don't exhibit it for everyone to see!" (Maocao 2011).

Not infrequently, postings by Zhang, Hu and Lü precipitated more direct pushback from sceptical readers. For example, Hu Jian wrote:

> Go down to the grassroots. A national campaign in the media sector is beginning to "go to the lower levels, shift work styles and change writing styles". Now some journalists are writing news from the office and they do not have lively material. If they aren't moved emotionally, who will be moved? Some can see but do not experience burning-hot lifestyles. Lifestyles are so rich and colourful, but reports are flat and powerless. The emergence of microblogs' short and swift style has become a challenge. Going down to the grassroots is a required course [必修课, *bixiuke*] for those working in journalism. Using one's feet to write the news [用脚写新闻, *yongjiao xie xinwen*] is the only way to provide news that is truly good (Hu 2011d).

Although a number of readers indicated their approval, Hu's comment sparked a major debate about such topics as media freedom, journalism law (新闻法, *xinwenfa*), and even excessive oversight of the propaganda system. In a post that was deleted and then reposted,

Lijian6789 wrote: "We need a journalism law. Don't trample on media freedom. Full protection for the freedom and rights of media and media personnel is fundamental" (Jia 2011).

Five minutes later, reader Mao Junbo, concurred forcefully:

> What should we do if the report has been written but it cannot be published?! The Propaganda Department does not reflect upon itself but blames journalists! It is too hilarious! Look at the example of the [Wenzhou] high-speed train incident. All that empty speech. How is that writing with one's heart? In what direction do you want people to shift their efforts? I couldn't stop myself from saying a few words for my journalist friends (Mao 2011).

These replies led to a chorus of re-tweets as microbloggers shared Mao's comment with their followers. At 8:55 a.m. on 11 August, microbloggers began to re-post a comment by Lijian6789 containing a quote attributed to CCP economic planner and former revolutionary, Chen Yun:

> In the Republican period there was a journalism law, we CCP members carefully researched its every word to grasp its essence and inadequacies. Now that we have power, I think it's still better that we don't have a journalism law. Without a law, we can be proactive. We can control whatever we want to control (Tianchengzuozhihu 2011).

Microblogger Liu Bo responded, "I propose the drafting of a 'journalism law'" (Liu 2011). Tang Qianjun and others posted a pessimistic appraisal of the likelihood of such a reform: "Despite countless appeals, a journalism law has failed to appear" (Tang 2011).

This sort of direct appeal for reform and strong criticism of government policies in the context of a conversation involving a powerful representative of the party-state is rare in Chinese politics. Such exchanges are seldom seen in Chinese public forums and almost never appear in China's mass media. The political and economic constraints imposed on media by the central and local branches of the Propaganda Department simply do not permit the dissemination of such views.

The pushback that Hu Jian's post precipitated was far from an isolated occurrence; it was also not the most extreme. Heated, even profane, expression of dissent was voiced by microbloggers concerned with the rights of Uyghurs and deteriorating public security in the Xinjiang Automonous Region, where Lü Huanbin was based.

Two years prior to the period under consideration by this study, the accusation that six Uyghur factory workers in Guangdong had raped two Han women led to violent reprisals by Han workers that were captured on video and circulated online. Peaceful protests by Uyghurs in Xinjiang led to a government crackdown, bloody inter-ethnic conflict and the decision by authorities to shut down the internet in Xinjiang for ten months (Millward 2009: 349–352; Cliff 2012: 80; Morozov 2011: 259–260; Sullivan 2013: 5). Despite subsequent efforts to ameliorate bad blood with capital investment, development plans and the resignation or removal of Xinjiang officials, including the party secretary, Wang Lequan, considerable tensions remained between the party-state and the Han and Uyghur populations (Cliff 2012). Lü Huanbin's 15 August tweet about a Hong Kong film crew's production of a documentary called *Strong Xinjiang Dream* (强疆梦, *qiangjiangmeng*) prompted angry responses from readers on the lookout for racism and disregard of Uyghur perspectives as well as from Han ethno-nationalists and government sympathizers. From 15 to 19 August, Lü's microblog became a virtual battleground over ethnic rights, Han nationalism and the portrayal of Xinjiang in the media. Lü's post read as follows:

> *Strong Xinjiang Dream* aims to preserve the truth of a great history and speaks for greater Xinjiang. The great film by Hong Kong Satellite Television (HKS) is led by Mr. Yang Jinling, who started production today. I went to get a sense for the atmosphere, which was passionate and strong (Lü 2011c).

Minutes later, Kaishui daren (开水大人) wrote,

> Go have your dream. It has lost its strength. Is [Xinjiang] strong compared to Africa? Every day it is like Afghanistan. Just leaving the house requires courage. This group of Hong Kongers has come to laugh at Xinjiang. You princelings who accompany them are the happy readers of books (Kaishui daren 2011).

Nearly 30 minutes later, Guansiji (关斯基) posted,

> So long as the dream doesn't remain on a superficial level it will be fine. Do more for the masses, otherwise the power of *weibo* is truly frightening (Guansiji 2011).

In a post that was subsequently deleted, Saerdna815 wrote at 8:38 p.m.: "A dream that neglects the Uyghurs and other ethnicities will

forever be a dream". 0jingmin0 (0 井民 0), a journalist with the *Xinjiang Economic Newspaper* (新疆经济报, *Xinjiang Jingjibao*), wrote, "It's always good to have dreams" (0jingmin0 2011). At 12:23 a.m. on 16 August, MadanAMn (瑪蛋, AMn) tweeted,

> Let's take a look at the [film's] contents. Xinjiang's dream must be fulfilled by all ethnicities. Can we rely on Hong Kongers for this? They should make their film and leave! (MadanAMn 2011)

Utilizing a word written in pinyin, presumably to reduce the likelihood that the comment would be deleted by censors, DU Zhangfu (DU 丈夫) wrote "Old Yang is at the centre of a dream of rape" (DU Zhangfu 2011). Nanfang de feng 2010 (南方的风 2010) tweeted, "I am looking forward to Mr. Yang's *Strong Xinjiang Dream*" (Nanfang de feng 2010 2011). Energy zai lushang (Energy 在路上) expressed exasperation at the direction of the conversation:

> I hope that "Strong Xinjiang Dream" is not just a slogan. We have struggled for so many years and still there are so many misunderstandings. Figuring out how to make people understand the real Xinjiang is a weighty responsibility. I support you! Let's work together to realize a "Strong Xinjiang Dream"! (Energy zai lushang 2011)

Yantong yijing (炎瞳一境) continued sarcastically, "Today the strongest in greater China are not the heroes of history but the Municipal Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau officers [城管 *chengguan*]" (Yantong yijing 2011). Chawu cishi (查无此狮) retorted, "A strong Xinjiang must be founded under the strong rule of a single race that cannot coexist harmoniously with a criminal race" (流氓民族, *liumang minzu*) (Chawu cishi 2011).

The type of exchange that followed Lü's upbeat comment provided a window on the visceral tensions in Xinjiang in real time, providing clear corroboration of the pushback hypothesis. Even Guansiji's encouragement of Lü was couched in ominous tones: More concrete work must be done to alleviate tensions, or the power of *weibo* could lead to instability. As would certainly be the case for official media reports overseen by the Xinjiang Propaganda Department, Lü Huanbin did not intervene or attempt to guide the conversation in a more politically correct direction. Indeed, he did not comment at all.

(H3) Failure to Interact

Why didn't Lü Huanbin get involved in the heated exchange over his post? One possibility is that Lü, as someone relatively new to propaganda work in Xinjiang, was unused to facing such hostility and simply did not know how to respond. Perhaps he was also uncertain as to whether it was best to acknowledge or ignore the criticism, as presumably either tactic could backfire, lessening party-state authority. On the one hand, responding to his readers' criticism could be interpreted as the tacit admission that CCP policy in Xinjiang has serious failings and even serve to encourage more criticism or dreaded offline activism. On the other hand, ignoring the unfolding debate could readily be interpreted as disregard, suggesting that Lü felt entitled to speak to his followers but not obliged to listen to their views. Certainly Lü was not ignorant of the exchange, as he needed to look no further than his phone to see evidence of intense dissatisfaction with party-state policies associated with a legacy of information control, racial inequality, restriction of religious freedom, persecution of Uyghur activists and the inability to protect the lives and property of Han residents (Bovington 2010: 8, 83–84; Brady 2012; Cliff 2012: 80). In any case, Lü's failure to respond to dissenting voices was similar to that of Zhang Jianhua, who did not interact with his readers on controversial topics. Their *weibo* use provided unambiguous corroboration of the failure-to-interact hypothesis, a result that was less obvious for Hu Jian, who ran a much more interactive site.

Unlike Lü and Zhang, Hu Jian often replied to admirers and occasionally interacted with disgruntled readers. In one instance after posting on the merits of travelling widely (a tweet quoted above), Hu Jian re-tweeted the following remark by Xiehou (邂逅): "Can't afford to eat, can't buy a house, can't afford to see a doctor, how can I possibly travel widely?" (Xiehou 2011). Hu's brief reply read: "I just met a young migrant worker who had already been to six cities" (Hu 2011f). Thus, although Hu Jian responded to his desperate reader, he did so in a way that suggested the down-and-out youth just needed to buck up. If the young migrant worker with whom Hu had met could travel to six cities, why couldn't Xiehou do the same? Hu Jian's rare interactions with critics failed to address the root cause of their problems; he did not attempt to learn more about their concerns. Compared to Zhang and Lü, even Hu Jian's more interactive *weibo* use suggested a propaganda strategy absent the egalitarian exchanges

common to *weibo* users. His much more frequent interaction with readers who complimented his tweets may well have contributed to the appeal of his site, although further research would be required to confirm this point. In summary, the microblogging of Zhang and Lü provided unambiguous corroboration of failure to interact, but this was less clearly the case in the writing of Hu Jian, as he commonly interacted with supporters but only rarely with detractors.

Discussion

At present, few researchers have systematically evaluated the practice of official microblogging in China or considered the extent to which it contributes to political stability (Schlaeger and Jiang 2014: 193). The findings of this study should therefore be regarded as a snapshot of a fascinating new type of political communication, rather than as anything approaching a conclusive account. Moreover, not all official microblogs (or microbloggers) are created equal, so to speak. Even in this small sample, there was variation in such topics considered as microblogger–reader interaction.

One noteworthy feature of this analysis of official microblogging was the finding that the propagandists tended to emphasize positive, apolitical messages written in plain language. By mixing commentary on non-threatening lifestyle issues including sports, art, culture and education with the obliquely political, the writings of these cadres revealed a nuanced approach toward encoding the regime's preferred values into the minds of the public. Commentary associated with the soft-sell approach to propaganda encourages citizens to pursue happiness through individual improvement and the embrace of China's status quo. The official microblogging also attempted to bridge the growing divide between the abstract, jargon-laden, somewhat ossified Sinified Marxist "official language", which is oriented toward the CCP's rank and file, and popular language pertaining to culture, morality and politics. The strategy of eschewing bureaucratese also reflects the recognition that official language is unpopular among China's youth and that its use may increase pushback by readers (Link 2013: 243).

A second finding concerned the clear corroboration of the pushback hypothesis. As the strongest evidence of the pushback, the biting criticism of Lü's tweet praising the *Strong Xinjiang Dream* docu-

mentary revealed the extent to which *weibo* has made it possible for netizens to clash with authorities as well as with each other. Readers concerned with the status of Uyghurs or sceptical of mainstream media representations of Xinjiang did not seem to worry that their comments would out them to China's internal security apparatus as opponents of the regime, suggesting the emergence of a new sense of citizen entitlement to self-representation and resistance to ideological conformity. Just as Chinese blogs proved to be a freer medium than newspapers, *weibo* has seemed a step freer than blogs, despite the ongoing and increasing prevalence of censorship.

Should one infer that the freedom to blast the party-state's inadequacies in Xinjiang and elsewhere dissipates dissent, induces stability, and improves governance? This seems plausible if cadres effectively used *weibo* as a means of evaluating the risk of public opposition on key issues and took steps to ameliorate problems identified by the public. While an excellent subject for further research, determining the extent to which cadres utilize information obtained on *weibo* and act to change unpopular policies is beyond the scope of this project. Based on a review of this sample of official microblogging, it is reasonable to infer these cadres sought to guide public opinion by persuading netizens that the regime was taking steps to improve its performance.

To what extext is *weibo* useful for cadres to better understand and accommodate public preferences? Zhang Jianhua's and Hu Jian's posts suggested that they believe in the utility of *weibo* as a means of understanding public opinion and improving government performance. Zhang urged the "relevant agencies" to use *weibo* to solicit suggestions from the public for renaming two bridges in Nanjing spanning the Yangzi (Zhang 2011b). Hu Jian told his followers to support Acting Provincial Governor Xia Baolong's open letter to netizens calling for them to submit recommendations to the provincial government and promising to act upon reasonable demands (Hu 2011g). Yet the posts by Zhang Jianhua and Lü Huanbin showed little measureable evidence that they were listening to the recommendations of their *weibo* audiences, corroborating the failure-to-interact hypothesis. As communications scholar Zhang Zhi'an has argued, strengthening interaction with netizens and listening to their voices is crucial to the further development of official microblogging (Zhang Zhi'an 2011). Although Hu Jian operated the most interactive site, his

claim that he showed "courage" as an official microblogger – presumably his willingness to interact with the public was an example of this – was ridiculed both as evidence that officials are "incredibly empty" (虚伪, *xuwei*) and as being "incomprehensible" by a self-described "P 民" or "fart person" (屁民, *pimin*) (Link and Xiao 2013: 83; Shuangyu 2011). For active microbloggers, using social media is a normal way of communicating matters both mundane and important. Rather than engendering sympathy or respect from readers, Hu's claim to bravery emphasized the vast distance between his lifestyle and the lives of China's digitally connected youth, who feel relatively powerless offline but much freer online. Despite Hu's willingness to have public exchanges with his supporters, although rarely with his critics, for *weibo* to facilitate more meaningful communication between state and society, official microbloggers need to address controversial opinions in ways that suggest their posts are more than public relations. In Xinjiang, Lü Huanbin's angry readers may well have interpreted his silence as frustrating evidence that the local state only wants to speak (and be heard) but does not take to heart input received from netizens.

How should we interpret the infrequent interaction between cadres and netizens, as asserted by failure to interact, particularly with regard to politically sensitive matters? In a well-publicized statement made at the 27 December 2011 inaugural "Xinjiang Inaugural Official Microblogging Conference" hosted in Urumqi, Lü Huanbin asserted that the government leaders of Xinjiang – including Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian, who was briefly the country's highest-ranking official microblogger – were committed to embracing *weibo* as a means of increasing the party-state's capacity to learn from the citizenry and to guide public opinion in Xinjiang and beyond. Lü urged party and state organizations, leading cadres and public servants to use *weibo* to "guide the public's sentiments, respond to the public's reasonable requests, and strengthen and renew the management of society" (*Sina.com.cn* 2011). Lü declared that microblogging has a "neutral" role in society but he also acknowledged that *weibo* have great power to mobilize, organize and connect. For the purposes of national security, Lü stressed that microblogging in Xinjiang was to be simultaneously encouraged and firmly controlled. He did not, therefore, appear to see *weibo* as intrinsically a source of stability or instability. Rather, local cadres' active and effective participation in the medium could

strengthen their ability to govern and bolster their efforts to preserve stability. The secret to success, according to Lü, is to harness *weibo* as an interactive platform for better understanding, engaging, guiding and ruling the public. Lü's subsequent promotion to party secretary and director of the Hunan Television Station in his native Hunan Province indicates that CCP higher-ups may have approved of his views (Xiao 2013). Lü's own microblogging, however, suggests that such rhetoric is more akin to "do what I say but not what I do", as this study reveals that he rarely interacted with the public online and his *weibo* site was seldom updated after 2011. It is plausible that Lü finds silence to have greater virtue for his career advancement than what Sheena Chestnut Greitens terms state "activism", or the "degree to which a government seeks to actively shape online or social media content in ways that are favourable to the regime" (Greitens 2013: 263). An additional explanation for weak cadre–reader interaction is the high cost of responding in terms of the sheer amount of time that doing so would require, as replies by cadres to audience comments would almost certainly lead to more queries from a public eager to interact with officials who are typically inaccessible offline.

Interestingly, the writing of official microbloggers suggested they saw *weibo* as a powerful communication tool as well as a medium that could undermine traditional propaganda work. Consider, for example, the tension between Hu's assertion that *weibo* was a powerful vehicle for "spreading the seeds of ideology" and his tweet that "the emergence of microblogs' short and swift style has become a challenge" for party-led journalism (Hu 2011c, 2011d). Taken in context, the latter tweet suggests that *weibo* provides information that competes with news provided by journalists who fail to write colourful reports. The solution is reinvigorated journalism focusing on grassroots developments. Hu's avid microblogging also indicates that he views *weibo* as a means of improving propaganda work by connecting with demographics less likely to tune into "propaganda as usual".

As an example of adaptive governance, the CCP's encouragement of official microblogging reflects the regime's desire to strengthen its capacity to lead by integrating public opinion into propaganda work in order to keep pace with China's rapidly changing information environment. However, if the *weibo* content analysed here is illustrative of broader trends, few official microbloggers appear willing to engage the public in meaningful dialogue. In such a

context, the noise of Chinese discontent is likely to rise unless the state cows or co-opts its most outspoken critics or enacts reforms that satisfy citizens who are displeased with the ruling party. The expression of dissent on *weibo* is also likely to "harden" non-Han identities, although as the tragic self-immolations in ethnographic Tibet demonstrate, the protests of the aggrieved are not necessarily an effective avenue to political reform. This study implies that the decision by official microbloggers to wade into the raucous environment of *weibo* may help to convince some citizens of the attractiveness of the political status quo, but the potential of government *weibo* to shore up political stability remains limited, unless the use of social media for state–society communication convinces citizens that the exchange of opinions online permits a greater role for the public in Chinese political life.

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Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China's "Fifty-Cent Army"

HAN Rongbin

Abstract: Studies on public expression in China tend to focus on how the state and internet users (netizens) struggle over the limits of online expression. Few have systematically traced discourse competition within state-imposed boundaries, particularly how the authoritarian state has adapted to manage, rather than censor, online expression. This paper explores and evaluates the state's attempts to manipulate online expression without resorting to censorship and coercion by examining the role of internet commentators, known as the "fifty-cent army", in Chinese cyberspace. To cope with the challenge of online expression, the authoritarian state has mobilized its agents to engage anonymously in online discussions and produce apparently spontaneous pro-regime commentary. However, due to a lack of proper motivation and the persistence of old propaganda logic, this seemingly smart adaptation has proven ineffective or even counterproductive: It not only decreases netizens' trust in the state but also, ironically, suppresses the voices of regime supporters.

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Keywords: China, discourse competition, internet commentators, political astroturfing

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Introduction

Studies on online expression and participation in authoritarian regimes tend to focus on the cat-and-mouse struggle between the state and its citizens over what can be discussed and what cannot. However, despite their insights on state censorship and netizens' resistance (for instance, Harwit and Clark 2001; Boas 2006; Goldsmith and Wu 2006; Deibert et al. 2008, 2010; Esarey and Xiao 2008; Lagerkvist 2007; Yang 2009), the liberalization-control framework implicit in these studies has its limitations: It not only promotes an incorrect image of netizens fighting unanimously against authoritarian states, but also leads us to overlook certain aspects of states' creativity in their adaptations to the internet era. To understand the impact of the internet on authoritarian regimes, particularly the resilience of authoritarianism in the new governing realm of cyberspace, it is important to look at the regime's strategies to manage – rather than simply suppress – online expression. How does China's authoritarian state manage public opinion beyond directly censoring content? And how does it steer online expression to its advantage without resorting to censorship or coercion? What are the most significant implications of state adaptation?

This paper explores these questions by examining how China's adaptive authoritarian regime has striven to maintain legitimacy by employing grassroots public relations techniques such as "astroturfing". I argue that, beyond censorship, the Chinese propaganda state has established an army of online commentators (the "fifty-cent army", 五毛党, *wumao dang*) to engage in online expression anonymously and promote a pro-government discourse. However, due to the lack of strong motivation to do their job well and the persistence of state propaganda logic that treats online commenting like old-style propaganda work, online commentators often get exposed and fail to fulfil their mission. As a result, this seemingly smart move has produced at best mixed results: Though it may have managed to increase the state's PR effectiveness on specific issues, it often backfires and chips away at the party-state's legitimacy.

Beyond Censorship: The Chinese Authoritarian State on the Internet

As important as it is, boundary-spanning confrontation on censorship is not the only aspect of public expression in Chinese cyberspace. From the state's perspective, as explained by Stern and O'Brien (2012: 175), "beyond a number of well-patrolled 'forbidden zones', the Chinese state speaks with many voices and its bottom line is often unclear". As far as online expression is concerned, the party-state has neither the capacity (Yang 2009; Esarey and Xiao 2008; Lagerkvist 2007) nor the intention to eliminate all public expression (Barboza 2011; Wen 2010; Richburg 2009; Lorentzen 2013). In fact, even political criticisms are tolerated to a large extent. King, Pan and Roberts (2013), through large-scale quantitative analysis of state censorship behaviours, find that the state actually prioritizes curtailing collective action over eliminating general criticism from the web.

The internet has created a "zone of freedom", which is not yet a full-blown public sphere, but relatively independent from the state (Hu 2008; Lagerkvist 2007). Such findings are suggestive, particularly because they implicitly acknowledge the limitations of focusing exclusively on censorship, a perspective that fails to pay sufficient attention to developments in online expression and state adaptation. As Jens Damm (2007) points out, such a framework is mistaken in assessing the internet's impact on Chinese society because it ignores the rising urbanism and consumerism that renders a fragmented and localized internet. According to him, Chinese netizens typically do not demand large-scale political change even though they are ready to protest when the state interferes with their "zone of freedom".

Meanwhile, the authoritarian state and its propaganda machinery has adapted far beyond censorship and coercion. Scholars have long observed the adaptability of the Chinese authoritarian regime and viewed it as the primary reason for its resilience (for instance, see Nathan 2003; Shambaugh 2008). In particular, the state has made significant adjustments to its propaganda system to better cope with the challenges brought about by the increasingly commercialized media and the rise of the internet. Zhao Yuezhi (1997), for instance, suggests that market mechanisms have been introduced into party journalism, contributing to the emergence of a "propagandist/commercial model" that performs more subtle ideological work for the

party. Similarly, Daniela Stockmann (2013) finds that media commercialization has strengthened the party's rule because it provides the regime with better information about public opinion while allowing the party to shape its message when it deems necessary.

In the realm of online expression, the Chinese authoritarian state has adapted by establishing the world's most complicated censorship system. Observers have debated the effectiveness of such a system. Though some scholars argue that the state has achieved sufficient control (Boas 2006), many suggest that it has failed to make online expression conform to its preferences (Yang 2009; Esarey and Xiao 2008). In fact, arbitrary and harsh censorship often backfires, politicizing otherwise neutral or indifferent netizens. The continuing rise of critical expression online and the declining effectiveness of state media (Lei 2011; Tong and Lei 2013) have forced the state and its propaganda system to adapt further beyond censorship. On the one hand, the state has increased its online presence by promoting official media outlets and e-government platforms (Kalathil and Boas 2003; Damm 2006; Jiang and Xu 2009). On the other hand, it has also started to adopt innovative propaganda techniques. Lagerkvist (2008), for instance, argues that the state has resorted to "internet ideotainment", which juxtaposes "images, symbolic representations and sounds of popular web and mobile phone culture together with both subtle and overt ideological constructs and nationalistic propaganda". According to him, the new propaganda has shifted the focus from ideology to the subtle management of the public's attention (Lagerkvist 2010: 161–189). Hung Chin-Fu (2010), analysing the role of online commentators in pacifying angry netizens during the 2008 Weng'an riot, identifies another technique the authoritarian regime has employed to manage public attention. He argues that the strategy – mobilizing online commentators to engage in online comments anonymously – has facilitated the revitalization of the state's propaganda apparatus.

These studies have provided insights into the state's adaptation within the virtual space. However, state adaptation entails more than simply adopting new propaganda techniques. To better understand state adaptation, it is necessary to explore the effectiveness and the major implications of the new techniques. How does the online commentator system function? How effective is the system? Answers to such questions are essential to gauging the adaptability and resili-

ence of the authoritarian regime. I will examine how the state has recruited, trained, utilized and rewarded online commentators as well as explain how the commentators go about doing their job. Based on that, I evaluate the effectiveness of the online commentator system, discuss its implications and highlight the obstacles in the state's adaptation.

I maintain that state adaptation is often not a centrally coordinated process in which the state acts as a monolithic rational actor. Instead, multiple party-state agencies at different levels and in different sectors as well as individual officials are involved, each with different incentives and priorities. All of these actors can be innovative in adopting new measures to cope with new challenges, and central coordination and mutual learning help diffuse this adaptation. Furthermore, because state adaptation happens within the existing power configuration without systematic organizational change, involved actors often continue to comply with the power structure and logic they are embedded in. This explains why the seemingly smart move of introducing online commentators proved ineffective or even counter-productive.

Astroturfing and Methods

Astroturfing is a PR technique used in politics and advertising in which actors are paid to display apparently spontaneous grassroots support for a particular product, policy or event. In Chinese cyberspace in general, many users are motivated to advocate or impugn particular facts, opinions or beliefs anonymously. Regardless of whether they are sincere, these efforts are considered astroturfing if users pose as spontaneous voices when they are really organized or sponsored by certain groups. Though the technique is also widely adopted by netizens for personal or commercial purposes (Roberts 2008; Kong 2008), this paper will focus on political astroturfing by the state.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, data collection has been a major challenge. There was no official announcement regarding when, why or how the internet commentator system was created, nor are systematic data available on how the system operates. Aside from interviews with informants and existing studies, I base my analysis primarily on three sources.

First, sources from the party-state provide us with clues to how the system works. Incompetent, careless or disaffected state officials working in the propaganda system have on occasion leaked internal documents, communication logs and other pieces of information exposing online commentators. For instance, *China Digital Times* (CDT) at Berkeley has collected thousands of state censorship directives due to system glitches of the websites that stored them. In addition, people who previously worked in the system sometimes talk about their experiences. Two years after he quit the job, a former Nankai University student explained his work monitoring the university campus Bulletin Board System (BBS) on an overseas Chinese forum.

Second, official media reports constitute another major source of data. Local governments and propaganda branches sometimes view the introduction of online commentators as part of their routine job or even as an achievement to be reported to higher levels. This is evident in a local media report on the training of online commentators in Shanxi Province, which also proudly provided links to coverage of the event by influential news portals such as QQ.com and 163.com and state media outlets such as people.com.cn (*Jincheng Xinwenwang* 2006). Though official media rarely detail how online commentators operate in the field, they provide clues about the state's perspective and structural features of the system.

Third, along the lines of what Stern and O'Brien (2012) call a "state reflected in society approach", I draw on my own observations and on netizens' experiences gleaned from long-term in-depth online ethnographic work. Between 2009 and 2013, I usually spent at least one hour a day observing selected sites, including but not limited to tianya.cn, MITBBS.com, newsmth.net, and the news channel of 163.com. Occasionally, I also took the online "guerrilla ethnography" approach (Yang 2003) and explored links provided by netizens to other online platforms. With limited access to direct information sources inside the state, what netizens see and experience serves as an indirect but crucial way to understand how online commentators operate in the field. In effect, tracing and comparing behaviours of netizens and online commentators can provide direct evidence for analysis. Furthermore, Chinese netizens are very sensitive to and sometimes cognizant of the state's efforts to manipulate public opinion. They can help the researcher with data collection in this regard.

As a matter of fact, many leaks from the state I draw on were first provided, collected and disseminated by netizens.

Manufacturing Consent Online: The Rise of the "Fifty-Cent Army"

The internet has lowered the cost of public expression in authoritarian regimes by enabling citizens to circumvent many forms of restriction. In China, monitoring in the traditional sense rarely works online, as denying or editing by gatekeepers before publication has become less common. State agents or intermediary actors, such as the forum moderators who are delegated the authority to filter online content, only assume a partial gate-keeping role by blocking sensitive keywords and deleting taboo topics *ex post facto*. But even when they do this diligently, their efforts are plagued by a lack of standards and hindered by the vast number of threads generated daily by users. The internet thus provides a cheap and effective way to advance agendas and influence public opinion, even for actors with limited resources. Anonymous expression, which is the dominant form of online expression in China, is particularly vulnerable to manipulation, as manipulators, sometimes using multiple usernames (IDs), can effectively "stir up" (炒作, *chaozuo*) a certain topic to attract other netizens into the discussion and turn the topic into a hot one (Chen et al. 2011). For instance, BBS users used to employ multiple "jacket IDs" (马甲, *majia*, "ghost accounts") to fabricate a crowd in order to hit the top-ten list that appears on the front page. The practice was so common that major BBSs like Newsmth.net now limit the number of IDs one person can register (see *Newsmth* 2007). In the accidental user-data leakage of tianya.cn (Lin 2011), China's largest internet forum, netizens discovered thousands of ghost accounts that were registered with identical e-mail addresses and passwords (*Popular Computer Weekly Microblog* 2011). Such evidence shows that a "public" can be created online that may be able to influence public opinion through purposeful framing and information input.

The state is motivated to manipulate online opinion due to both the challenges and the opportunities the internet has presented. On the one hand, state propaganda is becoming increasingly ineffective. Though it may be premature to dismiss the role of the propaganda system (Kennedy 2009; Lagerkvist 2010: 180), some studies have

found a negative correlation between the exposure of official propaganda and citizen's trust in the government (Chen and Shi 2001). The situation online is not any better for the state. Studies suggest that with the emergence of a critical and politicized citizenry online, the state has not only failed to control online expression (Esarey and Xiao 2008; Yang 2009), but also lost its ideational leadership (Lei 2011; Tong and Lei 2013). Direct observation echoes the findings: Netizens demonstrate strong distrust of mouthpiece media outlets like *People's Daily* (人民日报, *Renmin Ribao*) and China Central Television (CCTV). Many netizens refer to *People's Daily* as *Screwing the People Daily* (日人民报, *Ri Ren Min Bao*), and CCTV is nicknamed CCAV, with AV standing for pornographic videos. The growing ineffectiveness of state propaganda demonstrates the necessity for the regime to adapt.

On the other hand, the internet also provides the state with new possibilities and can be turned into a new propaganda frontier (Lagerkvist 2008). Besides increasing direct propaganda efforts online and setting up e-government platforms (Wang 2011; Ye 2009; He 2010), the battle is also fought on multiple fronts. According to Chen Kai, Deputy Secretary of the Shanghai Municipal Communist Youth League Committee, the state's internet PR efforts are comprehensive and its tasks include collecting, researching, analysing and, finally, guiding public opinion (Chen 2007). The introduction of internet commentators, as will be discussed below, represents a new endeavour by the state to guide popular opinion online.

Introduction of Online Commentators

The earliest mention of online commentators appeared in an official report that stated that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Changsha Municipal Committee of Hunan Province began to hire internet commentators in October 2004 (Zhonggong Hefei Shiwei Xuanchuanbu 2006). These commentators were paid a basic monthly salary of 600 CNY (approximately 88 USD), plus 50 cents (CNY) for each post – the source of the nickname the "fifty-cent army" (Zhang 2010a; Yang 2009). In late 2004, the Supervision Department of the CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection organized a training session for 127 internet commentators from all over the country with a special focus on internet anti-corruption propaganda (Ma 2004). The earliest mention of online commentators on campus BBSs

can be traced to Nanjing University in 2005 (Bandurski 2008; Hung 2010; Wen 2008).

Online commentators work either full-time for state media portals, such as xinhuanet.com and southcn.com, or part-time for various government agencies (Zhang 2010a). Many of the full-time commentators work like reporters or columnists in traditional media. These commentators are relatively high-end, as they receive higher pay and do not conceal their identities or their affiliation with the state. Those deployed anonymously to manipulate online opinion through astroturfing are qualitatively different. They are often either public servants (often in the propaganda system) assigned online commenting tasks in addition to their routine work, or specially recruited. They receive low base salaries and a small per-piece payment. Most importantly, they are anonymous when engaging in online discussions because they conceal their identities and affiliation and pretend to be average netizens. In other words, they are more like online "trolls". Analysis in this paper focuses exclusively on these anonymous commentators because the government's deployment of full-time commentators, who work more like traditional propaganda workers, is less innovative than astroturfing.

There are numerous agencies sponsoring internet commentators, including local propaganda offices, ministries and even schools and state-owned enterprises. For instance, China's largest oil and gasoline producer, Sinopec, was found to be running an astroturfing campaign justifying rising gasoline prices in 2011 (Wang 2011). In addition, a single institution may have multiple groups of online commentators at work. For example, a former Nankai University student disclosed that there are two student groups working on public opinion on the university's BBS sites: one under the Propaganda Department of the Party Committee, primarily responsible for monitoring and deleting unacceptable posts, and the other under the Student Affairs Office, meant to guide public opinion through astroturfing (*Unknown Space* 2010).

In general, available evidence suggests that the introduction of online commentators was not a centrally coordinated policy, but rather an initiative of various state agencies at different levels in different sectors. Thus the rapid spread of online commentators was likely due to officials at all levels gradually, and more or less simultaneously,

realizing their potential for guiding public opinion and mimicking each other.

Recruitment

Internet commentators are recruited through many channels. Most of them are directly recruited from within the propaganda system or from other governmental or semi-governmental institutions. In some cases, local governments or government institutions may directly recruit from the general public (Zhonggong Zhengding Xianwei Xuanchuanbu 2009). Certain recruitment criteria are common, including loyalty to the party-state and online communication skills. For instance, a leaked document from the Hengyang Party-Building Web's "Party School Frontline" channel laid out the requirements listed below (*Hengyang Dangjianwang* 2010a), which can also be found in other recruitment flyers. A good recruit must

- have a solid political stance; champion the CCP's leadership; firmly uphold the party's direction, principles and policies; be law-abiding; and possess the right ideology and good moral character as well as a spirit of professionalism;
- be equipped with theoretical training and good at cyber languages, with a wide scope of knowledge and skill in writing;
- be familiar with the work of the party-school system, have basic computer skills and be able to adeptly use relevant software and internet applications; and
- accept the supervision and guidance of the Party School Frontline channel.

In addition to the meaningless official clichés in the first and fourth provisions, the remaining criteria are also general and vague, with a lot of leeway. As a result, they are not necessarily strictly enforced. For instance, universities often treat online commenting as a part-time position that provides modest compensation for needy students, and recruitment is open to whoever is willing to do the job (Anonymous 3 2009). Random factors can play a decisive role in recruitment. According to a former Nankai BBS monitor, he was recruited simply because he had a good personal relationship with his predecessor (*Unknown Space* 2010).

Training

Online commentators often receive some training before taking up their job. Such training takes diverse formats but often focuses heavily on technical aspects, particularly writing and computer skills. At a training session organized by the Ministry of Culture, internet commentators visited xinhuanet.com and people.com.cn, exchanged their experiences in group settings and attended lectures with titles such as "Techniques of Online Commentary and Forum Management", "Online Communication and Web 2.0", "Online Communication and Crisis Management", "Guiding Public Opinion Online" and "Characteristics of Online Communication and Writing of Internet Comments" (Wen 2008). Local governments have adopted similar training strategies. Chengdu's Qingyang District invited veteran editors from *Xinhua* News Agency to lecture on how to write internet comments (*Qingyang Dangwugongkaiwang* 2009). The Public Health Bureau of Fuyang, Zhejiang Province, trained its part-time internet commentators by providing "Instructions on Internet Propaganda" and "Writing on Public Health Information" (Fuyangshi Weishengju 2009).

Available data show that part of the training is likely quite basic, revealing the inadequate skill set of many online commentators. For instance, the *Technical Training Outline* by the Hengyang Party-Building Web teaches online commentators how to register and log in to the system and how to post or reply to threads. The only trick of some complexity concerns using multiple IDs to avoid betraying one's true identity (*Hengyang Dangjianwang* 2010b). Sometimes, specific instructions are given on an *ad hoc* basis when online commentators are assigned a specific task, as discussed below. Such instructions, though they cannot replace more formal training sessions, serve as on-site training.

Functions

Online commentators may receive their tasks and instructions via phone calls or e-mails, or in person. However, state agencies sponsoring internet commentators are increasingly relying on online platforms such as intranets, QQ groups, and WeChat groups (both QQ and WeChat are popular instant messenging services provided by Tencent, one of China's largest internet firms) to manage their online commentators. For instance, a simple search of QQ groups alone

with the keyword "internet commentary" on 8 August 2014 returned almost 200 groups. This is impressive considering that the results do not include groups that have avoided the keyword in their title or made them unsearchable. This is highly possible because online commentating is essentially a secretive mission.

Online commentators assume a wide range of responsibilities. Typically, their tasks include collecting, analysing and reporting online opinion, guiding public opinion by engaging in discussion on hot-button topics, tracking the handling of public issues and coordinating with government agencies to provide timely responses to netizens (Hong 2009). The following excerpt from a recruiting flyer from the Propaganda Department of the Zhengding Party Committee, Hebei, provides an example of what online commentators are expected to do (Zhonggong Zhengding Xianwei Xuanchuanbu 2009):

- compose original postings and carry out positive publicity online to promote the priorities and major deployments of the party committee and the government;
- release authoritative information on major incidents to hinder the spread of rumours and ensure correct direction of online opinion;
- answer questions and clarify confusion for netizens on hot-button incidents, interpret the policies of and measures taken by the party and the government and divert netizens' emotions;
- strengthen information management on the internet and tightly integrate the analysis of online opinion, disposing of harmful information and guiding online opinion.

These instructions show that besides monitoring public opinion, the primary mission for online commentators is to facilitate state propaganda and defuse crises. In online propaganda campaigns, commentators work to attract public attention and fabricate an audience, if necessary. For instance, in 2008, as part of a province-wide propaganda initiative, officials in Hengyang, Hunan Province, asked online commentators to engage in thematic discussions, post comments on local and national websites, and participate in online interviews with local officials (Zhonggong Hengyang Shiwei Xuanchuanbu 2008). In online crisis management, internet commentators are mobilized to neutralize adverse socio-political events, particularly those that may trigger popular contention. For instance, online commentators were

deployed to pacify public anger after the Weng'an incident in 2008, in which rioters torched governmental buildings and vehicles because of the suspicious death of a young girl (Hung 2010). The following accidentally disclosed report by the Shanghai Communist Youth League (2010) summarizes the "achievements" of Shanghai online commentators in online crisis management:

> In 2009, under the guidance of the Municipal Internet Propaganda Office, online commentators from municipal agencies engaged in a series of online incidents, including the building collapse incident (Foster 2009; Cao 2009), forcible installation of green-dam software (Jacobs 2009; MacKinnon 2009), self-immolation of an anti-demolition resident (Qian 2010), the black taxi entrapment case (Bao 2009), and so forth. They put up, replied to, and forwarded over 200 posts on portal websites and forums, including people.com.cn, xinhuanet.com, eastday.com, tianya.cn and so forth. And more than 20 of their comments were accepted by the commentary channel of eastday.com (Shanghai Communist Youth League 2010).

Online commentators' tasks are not restricted to crisis management or propaganda. They sometimes serve as communication channels between the state and the public. For instance, online commentators from Changsha and Hengyang in Hunan Province regularly compile and report online opinions and netizens' complaints to local leaders (Zhang 2010b). Some campus forum managers I interviewed (Anonymous 2 2009) also claimed that their job includes collecting students' suggestions and criticisms for university authorities. "Linking the government and the people" is one of the few tasks that boosts the morale of online commentators.

Rewards

How do state agencies motivate online commentators? Though there are cases in which governmental employees are mobilized without extra compensation, many online commentators receive some form of compensation. Commonly, online commentators work only part-time and receive per-post payments at a rate of around 50 cents. However, the per-post rate can go as low as 10 cents and there can be a cap – 100 CNY (approximately 15 USD) per month in the case of Hengyang Party-Building Web (*Hengyang Dangjianwang* 2010a). Campus online commentators typically receive 200 to 300 CNY per month

(approximately 30 to 50 USD) as work-study compensation, barely enough for one or two weeks of dining at a university canteen.

In some cases, working as an online commentator may provide non-monetary rewards. Interviews with campus BBS managers (Anonymous 3 2009) show that student online commentators may be offered positions in the student union or Communist Youth League. This is attractive to students because working as a functionary in such organizations not only benefits politically ambitious students, but also strengthens their resumes even if they are looking for other jobs. For online commentators in the propaganda apparatus, a common reward is to select top performers and grant them awards during anniversaries or "Summing-up and Commending Conferences" (*Zhejiang Zaixian* 2008; also see *July 1 Community* 2010).

In general, online commentators do not receive encouraging rewards. The monetary compensation is at best modest and the per-post payment tends to incentivize them to prioritize the quantity rather than the quality of their comments. Other forms of rewards are rare and often symbolic in nature, hardly offsetting the stigma attached to the job. Such rewards are far from sufficient to maintain the morale of online commentators and motivate them to excel at their work.

Assessing the Online Commentator System

With the declining credibility of state propaganda, online commentators may potentially play an important role in maintaining the regime's stability and legitimacy. Unlike the old propaganda machine, which relied on coercive control over information flow, online commentators resort to identity and rhetorical power to persuade. By basing themselves on the ground and interacting as and with netizens, they may increase the credibility of state messages which otherwise would be discredited. And by fabricating a grassroots voice supporting the regime, they also sometimes bolster the state's preferred positions. In this sense, the system is a clever bid to replace increasingly ineffective old propaganda techniques (Hung 2010). But to gauge its effectiveness, it is important to see how online commentators actually conduct their tasks. The following two mini case studies, one on crisis management and the other on propaganda campaigns, reveal how online commentators act in the field.

Case 1: Trial of Bo Xilai

Figure 1: Sample of Online Commentators in Action

Source: *news.163.com* 2013.

The controversial trial of Bo Xilai was a major political event in 2013 and one in which online commentators were mobilized. As a former Politburo member and party secretary of Chongqing, Bo has a wide base of support because of his appeal to leftists and the poor (Bo was and still is very popular in Chongqing, as my casual interaction with local residents indicates). His fall not only evinced how corrupt the system is, but also signalled the power struggle within the regime (Li 2012; Zhao 2012). Thus, his trial was a critical moment for the regime, and the party-state made considerable efforts both to mute open opposition to the trial and to justify it. Besides quickly removing

negative comments from major forums and commentary channels of news websites, online commentators were deployed to flood the commentary zones with pro-government comments. The figure above shows six consecutive (rather than hand-picked) comments by four different users after one report on NetEase (163.com), which demonstrate well what manipulated "online opinion" looks like.
Here is the translation of these comments:

- chy106 [NetEase user from Nantong, Jiangsu Province]: "In a rule-of-law [I have translated 法制 as "rule of law" (法治, *fazhi*) rather than "rule by law" because the terms are used loosely and the commentator here clearly meant to praise the government] society, all privileges and monetary power pale before the law. Breaking the law will lead to no good ending".
- Daxiong Buzai Kuqi ["Daxiong No Longer Cries"] [NetEase user from Huizhou, Guangdong Province]: "The court is fair. The trial is open and people all over the country are watching and listening. We need to convince Bo and convince the people. This is China, a society that has rule of law".
- Daxiong Buzai Kuqi ["Daxiong No Longer Cries"] [NetEase user from Huizhou, Guangdong Province]: "Conduct the trial in accordance with law rather than being far-fetched. Hope the trial will be fair and open so that people will be convinced".
- [NetEase user from Huizhou, Guangdong Province]: "The fair trial of Bo Xilai reflects the centre's policy of achieving rule of law, punishing corruption and disciplining the party".
- chy106 [NetEase user from Nantong, Jiangsu Province]: "The open trial of Bo Xilai shows the fairness of the law".
- Taihang Xuemanshan ["Moutain Taihang in Snow"] [NetEase user from Heihe, Heilongjiang Province]: "The fair trial of Bo Xilai reflects the centre's policy of achieving rule of law, punishing corruption and disciplining the party".

Almost all of the 396 comments following the report smell strongly of official propaganda, particularly because of the blatant pro-government stance and the official language style. Not a single comment directly questions the trial or criticizes the regime. This is strange, as NetEase is known for its critical commentary among Chinese netizens. The repetition of the same clause by different users from different localities (for instance, the fourth and sixth comments

above) also deepens the suspicion because average netizens rarely repeat others in this way, while online commentators often do so to reduce their workload (Chen et al. 2011). Additionally, all these comments are highly similar, showing that online commentators may have received rigid instructions and even sample comments. A check of the users that posted such comments further reveals that at least some of them are state-sponsored: Most, if not all, of their recent comments were about Bo Xilai; all of their comments were pro-government and had an official tone; many of them registered not long before the incident; and a number of users posted multiple comments after the same report within a short span of time. All the evidence shows that the thread has been taken over by the "fifty-cent army", but the takeover is meaningless because all of these obvious signs of online commentating betray the intention of the state.

Case 2: "Liberate Thinking and Develop Hengyang" in Hunan

Online commentators are often mobilized for propaganda campaigns as well. In 2008, for instance, online commentators in Hengyang, Hunan Province, were summoned to facilitate a local propaganda initiative entitled "Liberate Thinking and Develop Hengyang". Besides serving as audience members in online interviews with local officials and producing comments on portal websites, online commentators were mobilized to make a splash on the local public forum, Red Net BBS. More specifically, they were ordered to reply to a particular thread titled "Hengyang Municipal Propaganda Branch 'Liberate Thinking Big Discussion' Special Thread".

To organize and coordinate online commentators to fulfil the task, a series of instructions were issued on how they should carry out their work. For instance, a notice on 26 September 2008 asked online commentators to compose and post 1,000 replies to the thread (*Red Net BBS* 2008). Subordinate counties, districts and bureaus under the municipality were assigned quotas with designated responsible personnel. In a follow-up notice on 9 October titled "Urgent Task", each online commentator was further asked to post at least 60 opinions and suggestions under the thread before 15 October. Both notices included instructions on what those comments should look like: They should be between 100 and 500 words, be issue-centred rather than pointing at certain units or individuals, avoid tedious empty talk

and focus on concrete opinions and suggestions, use multiple pseudonyms, and so forth. The 9 October notice also encouraged commentators to create distinctive IDs and share them with each other. After repeated orders, online commentators in the end managed to produce 1,115 replies to the thread.

Again, the thread smells like pure official propaganda, and there is little evidence of public participation. Most comments are highly similar in terms of their format and language code. In addition, unlike real spontaneous online discussion, these comments came in suspicious waves, indicating that the local propaganda office was orchestrating the action: 1,090 out of the 1,115 replies were posted between 22 September and 2 November, none between 3 and 10 November, and then 23 popped up within an hour between 19:18 and 20:05 on 11 November. After 11 November, only two more comments were posted, signalling that online commentators had completed their assignments and retreated. All these signs betray the government's manipulation of the discussion, causing politically sensitive netizens to stay away from the thread. Of course, without participation from average netizens, online commentators' astroturfing work becomes pointless.

As these two cases demonstrate, though online commentators work anonymously, they often get exposed, rendering their opinion-guiding efforts fruitless or even counter-productive. Given their inherently covert mission, why are online commentators often found out by netizens? There are two primary reasons.

First, online commentators are not motivated to excel in their jobs. Online commentators often get "caught" because they display certain traits like the official language codes they employ, the newness of their pseudonyms (meaning, the relatively recent date the accounts under those names were created), the sharing of multiple IDs by one IP address, IP addresses associated with government institutions, or repeated pro-government postings from a particular ID (Hou 2009). Such problems could be easily fixed if online commentators mastered some basic computer skills and writing techniques. However, aside from some basic training, there is no practical method to control and improve the quality of online commentators and their work. As Li Guanghua, who led a group of commentators in Hengyang, pointed out, the "capabilities of online commentators vary and many comments they post fail to guide public opinion online, and even backfire

sometimes" (Zhang 2010b). Without a way to guarantee the quality and evaluate the performance of online commentators, it is difficult, if not impossible, to improve their effectiveness. In effect, since many online commentators are propaganda agents or government employees, they are familiar with official language code, but not online expression. What makes things worse is that the instructions and rules they have to follow when carrying out their mission also prevent them from wholeheartedly adopting the cyber language, as the two cases above demonstrate.

There is also little incentive for online commentators to take their job seriously and enhance the effectiveness of online commentating. Since most online commentators receive a per-post payment (see the discussion on rewards above), they are incentivized to prioritize quantity over quality in their job. The problem becomes even worse given the low morale of many online commentators. Other than those who persuade themselves that they are contributing to social stability and helping link the state to the people, many online commentators do not see any value in their job. One campus forum commentator told me that he basically looked the other way in terms of online discussions by his fellow students:

> My friends know that I am working as an online commentator. You cannot hide anything when you all live under the same roof. I remain silent most of the time and only remind them when they are going a little too far. It is not glorious, but they understand (Anonymous 1 2009).

This quote suggests that monetary incentives are insufficient to motivate many online commentators. In fact, the very fact that online commentators are paid can sometimes be demoralizing because it makes online commentating seem like a cheap "sale of (priceless) souls" (出卖灵魂, *chumai linghun*).

Second, a more fundamental factor contributing to the dysfunction of the online commentator system is the persistent state propaganda logic. As Florini, Lai, and Tan (2012) have found, government agencies and officials often have difficulty in changing their behaviour and mindset even when institutions have been changed. The same mechanism is at work here: Although the state has attempted to adapt its propaganda strategy by introducing the online commentator system, the old mindset and practices of the propaganda machine still influence how the new system works. To guide opinions, online

commentators need to work covertly. Yet they are exposed directly or indirectly by the state itself in many instances. In particular, local governments are sometimes unabashed about their intention to guide public opinion through online commentators and thus allow reports on them to appear in mainstream media. For instance, *Nanfang Dushibao* (南方都市报, *Southern Metropolis Daily*) reported on Gansu Province's plan to hire 650 online commentators to guide public opinion (*Nanfang Dushibao* 2010), and the *Yangzi Wanbao* (扬子晚报, *Yangtse Evening Post*) reported on Suqian, Jiangsu Province, installing 26 internet commentators (Cai 2005). One major reason why online commentators are made known to the public is that they are treated like traditional propaganda workers. For instance, a local TV station in Xishui County, Hubei Province, reported on the training of online commentators as part of the routine propaganda work of the local government (*China Digital Times* 2011). In this sense, the visibility of online commentators is partly a legacy of past approaches to propaganda work.

The persistence of the outdated propaganda logic is also evident in the efforts by local propaganda officials to seek recognition from higher levels. As the deputy director of the Hengyang Information Office admitted, when calling on online commentators to participate in an online interview with the municipal party secretary, one of his considerations was to "plead for recognition" (邀功, *yaogong*) (Zhang 2010b). Another striking case is the Hengyang Party-Building Web. The website asked online commentators to comment on reports on its party-building channel, which netizens rarely visited. As a result, we see only party-school commentators following up dull and dry reports simply with a few words like "good" (好, *hao*), "upvote" (顶, *ding*) or "support" (支持, *zhichi*). Considering that the website has received a series of awards and honours (*Hengyang Wanbao* 2009), it is clear that the target audience of those commenting is not netizens, but the commenters' superiors. By introducing online commentators, local officials and propaganda cadres signal to higher levels that they are working hard. Whether online commentating has any real effect in guiding public opinion may be a secondary consideration.

As the existence of online commentators has been made public and as netizens have frequently caught them in action, the system has increasingly become a liability rather than an asset. It is especially the case when the marks of state propaganda become too obvious. In

these circumstances, the system can backfire and any opinion favouring the state can come to be taken as propaganda. Pro-government voices become "politically incorrect" among netizens and are frequently labelled the "fifty-cent army". This demoralizes potential regime supporters. Zhang Shengjun (2010), a professor at Beijing Normal University, complained in a report published by the popular nationalistic newspaper *Huanqiu Shibao* (环球时报, *Global Times*), that the "fifty-cent army" label has become "a baton waved towards all Chinese patriots". The online commentator system has engendered so much criticism that even pro-regime netizens have complained about it. One user from ccthere.com (a forum known for its relatively pro-government stance) expressed his condemnation:

> It is totally because of the incompetence of the Central Propaganda Department. For decades it relied on CCTV's monopoly and its capacity degenerated. […] Now it even relies on such disgusting means like employing the "fifty-cent army" to spread rumours! You're the government, not bandits! (Ccthere Community 2011)

Such criticism can sometimes take on symbolic forms and occur in public. In April 2010, when Wu Hao, then the deputy director of the Propaganda Department of Yunnan Province, was delivering a talk at Renmin University, he was attacked by a netizen who threw a wad of 50-cent CNY notes on his face and yelled "Wu Hao, fifty cents!" (*Xinkuaibao* 2010). The attack was enormously acclaimed by netizens (China Media Project 2010).

Conclusion

Despite state censorship, the internet has provided Chinese netizens with some freedom of expression. However, the anonymous nature of online expression also enables the state to manipulate online opinion through tactics like astroturfing. This paper has detailed the recruitment, training, functions and rewarding of online commentators. I argue that, as an important adaptation of the propaganda state to the internet age, the system often causes more trouble than it solves because the adaptation efforts are inherently constrained by the functioning logic of the propaganda machine. As more and more netizens become aware of online commentators, their posting frequently backfires. It is particularly ironic that the bureaucratic apparatus within which they work undermines the system, as online commentators pay

less attention to persuading the netizens and more to how they will be evaluated by their superiors. Thus, the target of many online commentators is not disaffected netizens, but the bureaucratic system itself.

The state, of course, is not the only party involved in online opinion-engineering. Social actors, particularly dissenters, employ similar astroturfing techniques to advance their agendas. Their attempts to manufacture discontent (see, for instance, Thornton 2008), though these have attracted much less attention and criticism, also impair the development of trust among netizens. Recognizing that their opinion can be manipulated, netizens become extremely sensitive to each other's identity. Terms like the "fifty-cent army" and "internet spies" are not merely markers that netizens use to label opponents, but also symbolize netizens' anxiety about identity: Who is a friend and who is an enemy? Such anxiety often fuels labelling wars and affects netizens' online behaviour, which in turn shapes the outcome of discourse competition. This suggests that studies about the internet should go beyond the struggle over censorship and systematically trace online discourse competition in which both the state and its challengers demonstrate considerable adaptability. Such adaptability will not only determine outcomes of the regime's short-term stability maintenance efforts, but may also impact its legitimacy in the long run.

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Regulation with Chinese Characteristics: Deciphering Banking Regulation in China

Orhan H. YAZAR

Abstract: The regulatory agency responsible for prudential supervision of the banks in China, the China Banking Regulatory Commission (CBRC), is not an independent authority. The agency's regulatory actions are constrained by the central government, which has to balance the prudential and non-prudential consequences of bank regulation for its political survival. The conditions and limits of the government's influence on the CBRC is analysed through an investigation of three regulatory cases. The conclusion is that the CBRC's regulatory actions are determined by the relative importance of prudential outcomes for the government's policy objectives.

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Keywords: China, banking, regulation, finance, regulatory state, CCP, CBRC

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Introduction

China has continued its relatively high pace of economic growth despite the global financial crisis (GFC) and its aftershocks. In 2014 the economy grew by 7.4 per cent, and in 2015 it is expected to grow by approximately 7 per cent. In governance, the new Xi–Li leadership has made headlines all around the world with its campaign against corruption. However, recent financial reforms, which received much less attention, are no less significant. Removing the floor on lending rates, approving the establishment of truly private banks and facilitating greater openness in capital account in the Shanghai Free Trade Zone are policy initiatives moving in the right direction for a more efficient financial system. Despite these positive steps and improvements in the regulatory framework, highly leveraged local governments, a slowing property market and the expansion of shadow banking pose a threat to the overall stability of the financial system, particularly the banking system. Growing interdependency between the world markets and China has drawn a lot of attention from scholars to the health and stability of China's banking sector, which provides most of the funding for the country's growth. However, this attention is skewed toward non-performing loans (NPLs), ownership structure, liberalization and, more recently, shadow banking. This paper[1] focuses on another key aspect of China's banking sector, as it investigates the capacity of the Chinese state to regulate and supervise the banking industry.

The Chinese state, governing a vast land with great diversity in terms of economic development, has to respond to conflicting policy objectives. The one-party political system in China and the entailing desire of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to continue its rule with an "output-oriented" legitimacy (Scharpf 1999) requires its main governing body – the central government – to deliver positive policy outcomes that will be acceptable to society. The central government,

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which is mandated to preserve social stability along with ensuring rapid economic growth, obliges the state apparatus under its control to answer to demands, contradictory at times, from society and the market simultaneously. The bureaucratic organizations – which are highly dependent on the CCP and the central government to exercise authority – are affected, as the central government struggles to handle contradicting policy objectives. The lack of independence of the bureaucratic organizations pushes them to follow biased central government policies that aim to induce higher growth, improve equity in society or reach other desirable policy objectives. Banking-sector regulation and supervision is one area exhibiting a potential for clashes between the overall party objectives and narrow bureaucratic tasks.

The Chinese Banking Regulatory Commission (CBRC) is the "independent" bureaucratic organization responsible for bank regulation and supervision in China and also a unit accountable to the Chinese government. For the CBRC, at times, the bureaucratic mission and directives developed by party leadership have conflicting objectives. These conflicts and the absolute authority of the government over the CBRC are expected to give rise to regulatory forbearance and weak oversight.

Despite this expectation, in recent years the CBRC has demonstrated increasing capacity to regulate the banking system in some areas while succumbing to the central government's demands in others. In order to explain the variations in regulatory performance, I analyse regulatory governance in China and the regulator's capacity to act independently in various cases. I observe the behaviour of the CBRC in three regulatory events that took place between 2008 and 2013. I present the backgrounds, actors involved and chains of events that led to the regulatory outcomes – stringent or lax regulation – in each case. The cases presented are built on the statements in the local media made by the actors involved, public announcements and reports published by public or private agents.

In the next section, I discuss the use of regulation as a governance tool in China and the relationship between the government and the regulatory authority. In the section following that, I briefly present the development of the banking sector and bank regulation in China. Then, in a subsequent section, I introduce the dilemmas faced by the CBRC and use three cases to illustrate how the regulator dealt

with each of these dilemmas. Last, I discuss my findings and present my conclusion.

Understanding Bank Regulation in the Chinese Context

China frequently uses regulatory tools to steer its economy, and China's actions in this regard may resemble those of any other regulatory state. The distinctiveness of Chinese regulation, and bank regulation in particular, stems from the different motivations behind its regulatory actions. In the advanced capitalist economies, regulation as a way of intervening in the economy to correct possible market failures by the state has been an important policy tool. We can cite four main drivers of the adoption of bank regulation: to prevent regulatory capture, to provide a public good by a benevolent regulator, to converge with international rules and to use bank regulation as an economic governance tool. These motives are supported by various explanations for bank regulation in the literature.

The regulatory capture explanation points out the inevitability of the capture of a state's regulatory function by those being regulated. The banks, as a powerful and organized interest group with extensive resources, will lobby the regulators and legislators for regulatory forbearance and laxity. Without counter-initiatives from the public, the regulatory environment will favour the banks' interests and the regulatory function of the state will be dictated by the banks (see Stigler 1971; Peltzman 1989; Shleifer and Vishny 1998; Shleifer 2005).

In contrast, the benevolent regulator explanation expresses the existence of market externalities and the possibility of market failures that may endanger the soundness of the financial system and erode the savings of the public (see Pigou 1938; Keeley and Furlong 1986; Barth, Caprio, and Levine 2006). In the face of such threats, the state will act to protect the public interest by rigorously supervising the banks and preventing excessive risk-taking. According to this view, the state's regulatory function will uphold the public interest and reflect the preferences of the benevolent regulators working on the public's behalf.

The international rule convergence explanation draws our attention to the development of international prudential standards and regulatory rules. While financial globalization has increased cross-

border activities of financial institutions and the volume of financial transactions, it has also created pressure for states to provide regulatory environments no less favourable than those offered in other places, in order to keep national financial institutions at home and attract international investors. To avert the risks of regulatory arbitrage and a race to the bottom in financial regulations, major states with large financial services industries have worked together on several occasions to reach a set of common prudential standards. The Basel Accords were the result of such cooperation. Those standards, agreed upon by several states, proliferated over time across the globe and have become international rules with the encouragement of international organizations and the willingness of some states to signal to international investors the quality of their regulatory environment. Hence, the international rule convergence explanation says that a state performs its regulatory function according to international cooperation and agreements (see Gadinis 2008; Acharya 2003).

Last, the regulatory state explanation sees the bank-regulation function of the state as being closely related to the existing state–business relationship and views the role of regulation as a tool for steering the economy. The regulatory state deliberately moves the regulation of banks away from being relational, informal and open to capture and delegates its regulatory function to an independent regulatory agency (see Moran 2001; Thatcher 2002; Gilardi 2008).

Chinese political economy is significantly different from that of the countries where these explanations were born and where they exerted influence on the regulatory functions of the state. Hence, though they may shed some light onto the Chinese experience of bank regulation, they are inadequate to capture the divergence from the regulatory models of the capitalist economies. This paper attempts to show the distinct features of China's bank regulation despite the steps taken in the early 2000s to converge with the independent regulatory authority model.

Dependent Delegated Regulation in China

China's regulatory framework has significantly changed since the turn of the millennium. Faced with large sums of non-performing loans in the late 1990s, the Chinese government decided to reform the bank regulation and supervision system and adopt an independent-regula-

tor model, which was the internationally accepted best practice at the time. This model introduced an "independent" authority to monitor risks and take action should the stability of the financial system be endangered by the banks. The arguments for having such an authority, despite increasing costs for the state, are similar to those in favour of central bank independence. Unlike ministries, an independent bureaucratic agency is less likely to adopt regulatory policies that will favour banks in return for political support. Furthermore, a specialized agency can supervise more effectively than could a ministry, which has multiple tasks and mandates.

Such delegation of decision-making power to bureaucratic organizations in a principal–agent framework was common in China, where the party was aware of the complexities of governance and chose to use expert bureaucrats to increase governance efficiency. However, unlike governing parties in other countries, the CCP followed the activities of bureaucratic organizations very closely and steered them towards consensus, preventing an abrupt shift from party policies (Shirk 1992).

The vastness of China's geography also made the delegation of authority from central to local levels in a principal–agent framework an imperative for governance efficiency. In China, economic and political decisions made by the central government are administered by the local governments at provincial levels. The government, as the principal, delegates its governing function to local governments, which act as agents. However, the consequences of such delegation may not always result in good governance, especially when local governments and firms collude to produce outcomes that diminish public goods, such as local protectionism (Young 2000) or lax work-safety standards (Jia and Nie 2012).

The new independent-regulator model added an additional layer of bureaucracy to China's governance and formed a three-layered governance structure comprised of the principal, supervisor and agent (P-S-A). In this P-S-A model, the principal delegates its authority to the supervisor to inspect the agents and ensure their compliance or good performance (Tirole 1986). Adding a third party between the principal and the agent is expected to increase efficiency in monitoring and evaluation. Yet, informational asymmetries between the principal and the supervisor may result in collusive behaviour between the supervisor and agent, in order to mislead the principal about the

agent's performance (Faure-Grimaud, Laffont, and Martimort 2002). The re-emergence of political actors in the financial regulatory frameworks in the US and other countries (Gadinis 2012) can be regarded as a reaction to such collusion between the supervisor and the agents in the years preceding the 2008 GFC.

This three-tiered agency model takes into consideration the possibility of collusion between the supervisor and the agent but fails to consider the possibility of collusion between the principal and the agent, especially when the principal has more than a single objective or actively seeks outcomes other than the supervisor's mandate. In bank regulation, the central government (principal) may delegate its power to an independent agency (supervisor) to monitor risks at the banks (agents); however, low risk-taking in the banking sector may not be the only output that the government (principal) demands from the banks (agents). Hence, conflicts between the central government's objectives and the supervisor's mandate can result in collusion between the principal and the agents, forcing the supervisor to use "selective supervision" (Motta 2010) and regulatory forbearance.

This paper argues that applying the principal-agent-supervisor framework in China will produce only partially efficiency-enhancing results due to China's institutional differences from other countries in which the P-S-A framework is applied. In China, state ownership continues to dominate the banking sector. The central government, which can control the operations of banks through patronage and the party-state hierarchy, relies on the banking sector for its developmental objectives and also has control over the bank regulators. Hence, in addition to the risk of collusion between the supervisor and agents, in the Chinese context the risk of collusion between the principal and the agents threatens effective prudential supervision.

The central government, as the principal, can weaken the bank regulator's mandate and engage directly with the agents in order to obtain regulatory outcomes supportive of its political survival. The bank-regulation process produces not only regulatory prudence or less risk-taking, but also varying economic outcomes dependent on the amount and direction of bank credit. As the principal, the central government may collude with banks or other actors involved in the financial-intermediation process in order to manage non-prudential outcomes that may be more valuable as political assets. To under-

stand the conditions that may lead to such collusion, we first need to understand the limits of regulatory space in China's governance.

The Chinese Regulatory State

The notion of a party-state with absolute control over both input and output of policy may be a popular way of viewing Chinese governance for those outside China. However, discrepancies between policy formulation and policy implementation have been a recurring theme in the Chinese political economy and tell a different story. As initially suggested by Lieberthal, who used the term "fragmented authoritarianism" in this regard, the party's executive power has been contested several times by other agencies and related parties that have sought incremental changes to initial policy designs or targets (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Mertha 2009). The policy makers at the top are aware of the loss during the policy transmission and usually collude with the receiving end of the policies to continue their rule (O'Brien 2009).

In China, the policy transmission process has become more intriguing in the last ten years with the introduction of several government agencies to regulate economic activities in areas like banking, securities, the environment and food safety. The emerging regulatory state in China resembles the Western model in many respects; however, it still evinces features of a developmental state (Pearson 2005; Bach, Newman, and Weber 2006). It is important to highlight the distinctiveness of regulation with Chinese characteristics.

Following regulation is a difficult task in China due to the opaqueness of the state apparatus. Actors and organizations involved in regulatory governance of specific policy areas rarely reveal their true nature. Despite this, scholars are still attempting to get a glimpse of the regulatory state in China. The contradiction between the CCP's tight oversight of regulatory agencies and their need to act independently is commonly recognized (see Mushkat and Mushkat 2012). New regulatory agencies that have flourished in the last ten years in China serve to ensure the party's role in economic governance rather than to open a space for independent technocratic actors. The diversion of Chinese regulatory governance from international norms, despite increasing links between the Chinese regulatory agencies and their counterparts, keeps the possibility of regulatory convergence at

bay. The significance and strategic value of various sectors define the stringency of regulatory controls in each sector (Hsueh 2012). Yet, Chinese political and market structures make the development of several regulatory trajectories possible (Pearson 2005, 2007). The independent regulatory agency model, in which the government delegates its authority to decrease regulatory capture, rent-seeking and collusion risks as it guides the market, has been adapted to the Chinese political economy.

The delegation of the regulatory and supervisory powers to a separate organization within the state results in decentralization and increases efficiency, but does not end collusion. The regulatory authority receives a conditional delegation in which the objectives of the party have the highest priority. Hence, China continues to present features of an interventionist developmental state despite having adopted an independent agency model. Regulatory agencies and regulation of banks follow a regulatory path that is consistent with the extant institutional context rather than following the global model. The idea of a regulator free from political interference and cut off from incentives that may affect their operational integrity in the global model resonates weakly with Chinese regulators.

In China, regulators' obligations generated by relationships and the incentives to nurture these relationships are as important as, if not more important than, bureaucratic obligations. In a political system dominated by one party, Chinese regulators cannot easily ignore political institutions and their demands. Among these institutions, the central government's preferences take priority, as they reflect the preferences of the top decision makers who have almost absolute authority to promote and demote bureaucratic staff. If the central government's preferences are key to understanding bureaucratic behaviour in China, it is necessary to look at its regulatory preferences in bank regulation cases.

In discussing the stagnation of financial reform in China, Shih suggests that control over financial resources empowers political leaders and helps them to build up a strong network of supporters, decreasing the possibility of efficiency-enhancing reform (Shih 2006). Following Shih's insight, it can be suggested that the regulatory preferences of the party leaders will depend on the rent-distributing consequences of regulatory outcomes and the consequences of regulatory failure for the continuity of the party elite's rule. The CBRC as a "de-

pendent" regulatory agency cannot ignore these preferences. When the central government, as the principal, sees fit to loosen or strengthen control over the agents for politically favourable outcomes other than a prudent banking system, the CBRC, as the supervisor, has little opportunity to act otherwise.

Hence, in China's banking regulation, we observe a dependent regulatory state model that is constrained by the party's political objectives and the individual duties of the actors involved to honour expectations generated by relationships. The regulation takes place in a permitted space in which great pains are taken not to damage any ties between the regulators and other actors.

The Banking Sector in China

The banking sector in China makes up over 70 per cent of the country's financial market. Its huge dominance can be explained by the state's total ownership of all capital, including bank capital, prior to the market reforms of 1978 and the very tentative steps of the government to liberalize the financial system in ensuing years. Before 1978, there was only a single bank in China, the People's Bank of China (PBOC), which played the dual roles of a commercial and a central bank. After the market reforms in 1978, this singular structure was divided into several government banks with various tasks in different economic areas. The so-called "big four" – the Bank of China (BOC), Agricultural Bank of China (ABC), China Construction Bank (CCB) and Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) – were established and until 1985 were restricted to acting within their respective state-defined areas. From 1985 onward, more competition was introduced to the banking system and small and medium-sized commercial banks were established by either city governments or joint ventures. In the 1990s, Chinese banks accumulated huge numbers of NPLs – mainly due to their continuous support for loss-making state-owned enterprises. The government was forced to take over the NPLs from banks and transfer them to the so-called "asset management companies" (AMCs) in 1999. Finally, China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) has opened the banking sector to limited foreign participation.

Since the turn of the millennium, the Chinese banking system has improved significantly, especially with competitive and interna-

tional regulatory pressure brought by the WTO. In 2003 a new, more assertive regulatory authority, the CBRC, was established. With the CBRC, the bank supervisory functions were separated from the PBOC; however, the PBOC continues to be responsible for the overall stability of the financial system (Bell and Feng 2013). International standards such as those created under the Basel Accords have become more influential in regulation, although with limited and selective implementation (Cousin 2011). The "big four" state banks were allowed to have foreign partners and were listed in the stock market. Corporate governance of banks has also received more attention recently.

Despite these developments, the political constraints on banks and their role in the economy as expansionary or deflationary tools continued to hinder their rapid reform. Independent bank boards or regulators were still out of the question. As Carney points out in his evaluation of China's banking reforms after 2002:

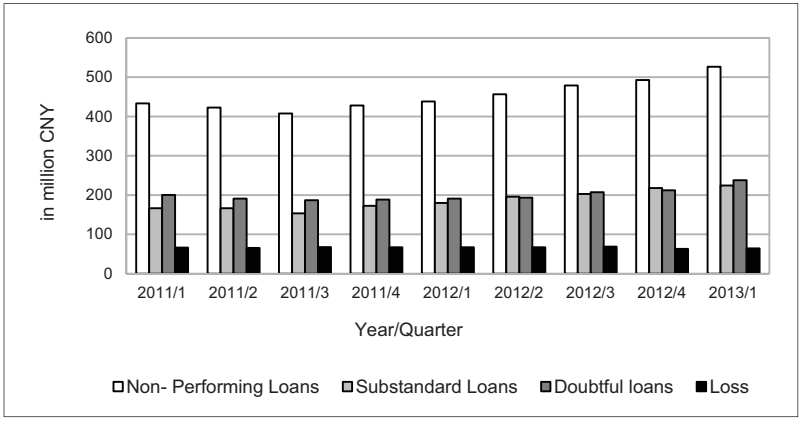
> Although regulatory reforms of major banks were guided by international standards, their implementation exhibited numerous departures from the intention of the rules. For example, those standards that tended concentrate key powers in the centre of banking and supervisory hierarchies were implemented rather vigorously, while principles that required independence of banks' boards and regulators were ignored in order to retain CCP control (Carney 2012: 22).

In the latest episode of loose monetary policy in 2008, the Chinese government's huge stimulus package was channelled through the banking system with less stringent risk management. The funds provided by the banking industry to the property developers and SOEs are at a significant risk of becoming NPLs, as Figure 1 illustrates.

The uncertainties and stricter controls in the property market are likely to increase the risk of default for the banks (Deloitte China Financial Services Industry Center of Excellence 2012). The decreasing profits of SOEs, especially the local government-controlled SOEs, which saw an almost 15 per cent decline in profits in the first four months of 2013 (MoF 2013), cast doubts on their ability to repay their loans. Considering China has not been able to get rid of its existing NPL portfolio in the AMCs, some see a great threat to the stability of the banking sector in China in the coming years (Pettis 2012). Others suggest that China's huge foreign-currency reserves

and low debt-to-GDP ratio will allow the Chinese government to intervene to prevent any instability in the banking sector. Besides old problems, the Chinese banking system faces risks from alternative financing mechanisms such as internet financing, shadow banking, new financial products and relatively weak economic growth. In this context, it is important to understand China's bank regulation and the role of the regulator in managing risks in the Chinese banking industry.

Figure 1: Non-Performing Loans



Source: Author's own compilation.

The CBRC

The CBRC was established in 2003 after a series of banking scandals hit the news and both foreign and local observers pointed out the lack of regulatory capacity in China's banking system, which was preparing to open its doors to foreign banks. At the beginning of the 2000s, Chinese officials were displeased with several events that shook society's confidence in the banking system and its official management. One incident, an elaborate scheme which allowed two bank managers in Kaiping, Guandong, to embezzle 485 million USD over ten years, was discovered in 2001 (*China Daily* 2008). In a separate incident in 2002, US authorities discovered that the head of Bank of China was involved in a connected-lending scandal at the New York branch (Peng 2007).

However, the development of necessary capacity to regulate foreign banks, which were expected to operate in China with the WTO agreement, gave government a strong incentive to strengthen bank regulation. Entry of the global banking giants into the country and the possibility of future takeovers (see Nolan 2008) gave further incentive to the Chinese government to strengthen banks and discipline their management.

In the face of banking scandals and future challenges, the regulatory function of the People's Bank of China was called into question. In early 2002, the Central Financial Work Commission started working on a re-organization plan for bank regulation ahead of the 10th National People's Congress (Naughton 2003). The new bank regulator's establishment was swift and the legal tools required by the regulator were provided quickly after its establishment. It has developed a large network of regulatory offices spread over 36 cities in China. It is well staffed, and 77.4 per cent of the employees have university degrees or other higher-level educational credentials (CBRC 2012).

Although the CBRC was given operational independence in the banking law, the State Council's authoritative control casts doubts on the limits of the CBRC's independence. Moreover, there is overlap between the mandates of the PBOC and the CBRC in some areas such as regulation of micro-finance and interbank lending (Gong and Zhou 2012). As China's banking system becomes saturated and begins to experiment with new financial instruments, the CBRC's job is becoming more complicated than simply enforcing capital adequacy ratios at banks (Chang, Ting, and Ma 2012).

The Dilemma of the CBRC

The CBRC as an organization was established to regulate and supervise the banking sector in China. This function entails a responsibility to encourage better risk-management practices in the banking industry and appropriately punish those who fail to act accordingly. Hence, the CBRC's primary mission is to mitigate excessive risk-taking behaviour in the banking system, which is the main pillar of the financial system in China.

But the CBRC is a state agency that is not independent from the CCP and its leadership. As a part of the Chinese state system, the CBRC has to follow guidelines provided by the State Council or the

Chinese government. These guidelines may be in regards to macro-economic policy, rural development or specific issues like curbing real estate prices. The main objectives of the Chinese government when choosing macro-economic policy are guided by growth considerations and a desire to maintain China's social stability. To achieve these objectives, the Chinese government will leave market rules and mechanisms aside from time to time. This tendency can reveal itself in the efforts of the Chinese government to control prices of poultry and other food items to tame inflation or to use exorbitant taxation to prevent speculative sales in the housing market. The elasticity of market rules and mechanisms also manifests itself in decisions to ease or halt credit pouring into the financial system through banks. During the inflationary phases of economic cycles, the government can order a minimal release of funds to the market, and in periods of contraction it can flush the market with money, as happened following the 2008 GFC.

The CBRC, fighting excessive risk-taking in the banking system, faces a dilemma when the central government issues directives to increase investment in the entire economy or specific areas of it mostly funded by bank credit. The encouragement of more risk-taking by the government clashes with the essential risk-control duty of the CBRC. The CBRC cannot ignore the central government but also cannot fail in its risk control duties. Moreover, the incentive structure for career development exacerbates the CBRC bureaucrats' dilemma.

In the Chinese bureaucratic system, promotions usually rely on strong networks and the performance records of the bureaucrats. On one hand, the CBRC bureaucrats try to avoid any failure in the area of risk control that may result in a banking crisis and, consequently, poor performance records. On the other hand, as it is common for financial cadres of the CCP to be promoted from executive positions at banks to regulatory institutions and vice versa (Martin 2012), these cadres will try not to alienate their political patrons by disregarding their demands, which may strain their relationships and future career prospects. Hence, the CBRC bureaucrats have to manage their political and bureaucratic obligations simultaneously and cautiously.

At either the central or the local level, the government, which may apply pressure to the CBRC to ensure politically favourable outcomes, has to take measured steps in their control as well. A banking crisis that may destabilize economic growth and cause social instabil-

ity would be a political disaster for the CCP. Closing businesses, laid-off workers, bankrupt businesspeople and masses who cannot access their hard-earned savings – this is not a favourable scenario for the party. The government, despite its ability to control the CBRC absolutely, thus controls only loosely, as bank regulation and supervision is of key importance for political and social stability. The three cases presented below will illustrate how the CBRC performs its duties in various circumstances when faced with contradicting demands from the "principal".

Regulating China's Banks

As the Chinese financial system is dominated by bank financing, the CBRC is a part of the discussion in regards to major economic decisions and events in the country. The financial diversification demands of the rising middle class, the financing difficulties of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the management of local-government debt, shifts in the country's economic model and other key economic issues require policy contribution from the CBRC. The CBRC has to carefully thread its way through policy discussions and take actions to fulfil its regulatory functions without clashing with the government's policy guidelines. In late 2011, handling the crisis-like situation in Wenzhou, the CBRC demonstrated this balanced regulation strategy.

The Wenzhou Mini-Crisis

Wenzhou, a city located in the southeast of China in Zhejiang Province, is home to small and medium-sized enterprises exporting labour-intensive light industry products. Wenzhou has been a model for other Chinese cities for its rapid export-led economic development, entrepreneurship and use of informal finance (Tsai 2006). As many export businesses need flexibility in business operations, Wenzhou businesses have to keep their company funds liquid. Hence, besides conventional bank loans, businesses in Wenzhou rely heavily on informal finance provided by wealthy individuals. Large sums of money can change hands each day, even without any written records of the debt. The city's strong economy ensures that debts are paid on time.

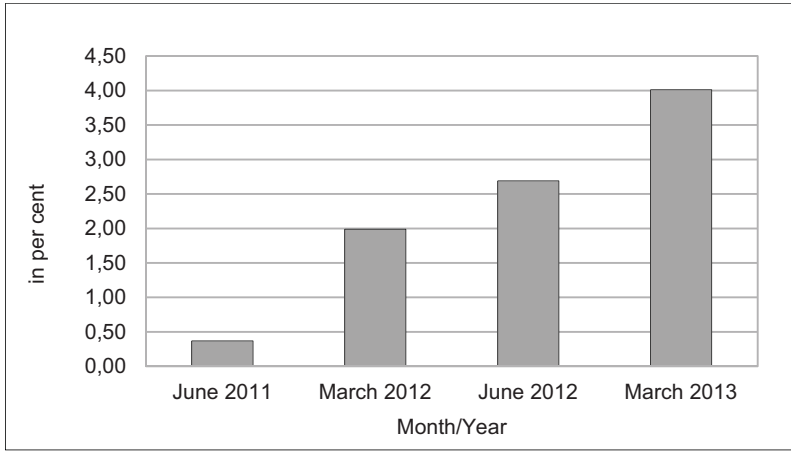
However, after the GFC, Wenzhou businesses suffered due to orders from their usual export customers in the US and Europe being cancelled. Banks facing higher reserve-ratio requirements from the central bank after 2010 further tightened the credit supply to SMEs, including to businesses in Wenzhou. As Zhang Lijun from China Everbright Bank explained, it was "definitely winter" for the SMEs, as banks chose to lend to "big, state-owned enterprises" (Jia 2011). The weak sales and financial hardships of some Wenzhou companies led to unpaid debts both at the informal and formal financial platforms. The situation took a dramatic turn when one of the prominent business owners from Wenzhou escaped to the US to protect himself from angry financiers (Lan 2011). This incident was followed by others, revealing a widespread debt problem in Wenzhou.

The possibility of a widespread economic and financial collapse in Wenzhou pushed the central government to act. The Chinese premier at the time, Wen Jiabao, in a Deng Xiaoping-style southern tour, visited Wenzhou and expressed the government's support for the SMEs. During his visit, Wen suggested that banks "should increase their tolerance for non-performing loan ratios of small enterprises" (Wang 2011). As one employee of a state bank in Wenzhou expressed, the CBRC repeatedly called for a more tolerant approach to SMEs and greater acceptance of NPLs (Wang 2012). It has also advised its own branches to apply a different risk-assessment standard to credits for small businesses and increase their tolerance of NPLs for these companies (CBRC 2011b). As a result of this lenient approach, by the end of June 2012 Wenzhou's rate of NPLs reached 2.69 per cent, a ten-year high, up from 0.37 per cent in 2011. In the first quarter of 2013, this rate further increased to 4.01 per cent (see Figure 2).

In the case of Wenzhou, the CBRC clearly followed the central government's directive instead of its mandate to prevent excessive risk-taking. The central government's regulatory preferences tilted towards lax regulation in order to prevent a financial and social crisis that could undermine the party's rule and bring its leaders' ability to govern into question. In order to avoid such an outcome, intervention at the highest level, illustrating the central government's high interest in the case, allowed SMEs to capture the regulatory process. The central government, as the principal, asked for leniency on behalf of the debtors. The CBRC, as the supervisor, had to give in when the

central government decided that protecting SMEs was more important for the CCP than was regulatory prudence. The conflicting objectives of the principal made collusion between the principal and banks possible and resulted in regulatory forbearance.

Figure 2: Wenzhou Non-Performing Loan Ratio



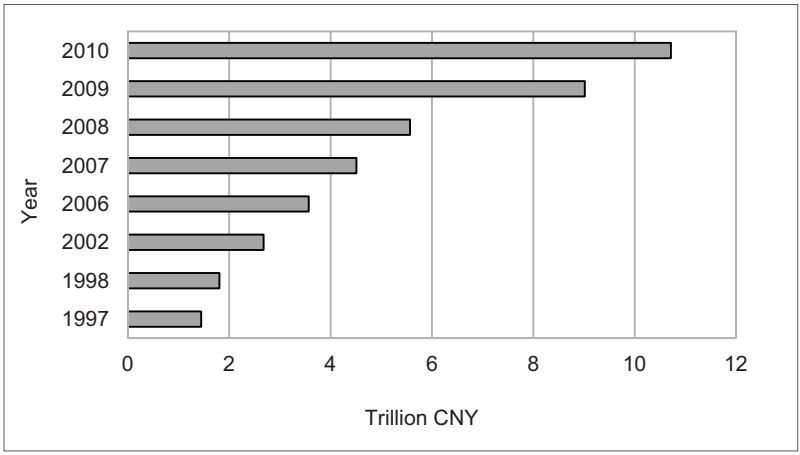
Source: Author's own compilation.

Local Government Financing Platforms

The relationship between the local governments and the central government has always been quite important for the economic governance of China. A crucial aspect of that relationship has been the arrangements to share fiscal revenues and responsibilities. Changes in the principles guiding the fiscal responsibilities and the revenue-sharing scheme have had serious consequences for the incomes and expenditures of local governments. The latest of those changes occurred with the 1994 tax reforms, which decreased local-government revenues and increased their fiscal responsibility to provide public services (Zheng 2009). Faced with a growing gap between revenues and expenditures, local governments had to find innovative ways of financing, as they were not allowed to borrow from the capital markets – in other words, from the banks directly. To circumvent this ban, local governments used state-owned enterprises (Jin and Zou 2002) and established government-backed financing companies to

borrow from the local banks. The latter, so-called local government financing platforms (LGFP), are less transparent in their risk assessments and accounting and rely heavily on land sales for their revenue stream (Rutkowski 2013). As Figure 3 illustrates, this opaque form of local-government borrowing has increased immensely since the 500 billion USD stimulus spending, reaching 2.53 trillion USD, making up 29 per cent of the country's GDP (Chao 2013). As Lu and Sun suggest, "most of the funding needs were met through LGFPs' borrowing from commercial banks, *with the guidance to do so by the PBC and CBRC*" (Li and Sun 2013; emphasis added).

Figure 3: Local Government Debt 1997–2010



Source: National Audit Report 2011: 3.

Since the problem was first recognized, in 2009, different stakeholders affected by the high debt level of local governments have acted according to their own particular interests. The CBRC was aware of the risk of default and tried to mitigate the risk in banks by issuing decrees and publicly warning banks. The policy makers in the central government, although acknowledging the problem, did not want to take decisive action. They believed that since many of the projects, such as toll roads, could generate income in the long run and need continuing financial resources to be completed, strict controls on new lending to LGFPs would be counterproductive. Banks, on the other

hand, were reluctant to stop lending to LGFPs, as they were competing for growth and as local governments were their preferred customers. Moreover, the relationship between local bank branches and local governments made it difficult for loan officers to deny loan requests from the LGFPs, especially in the case of city commercial banks. Hence, the exposure of city commercial banks to LGFPs is higher than the exposure of other banks to LGFPs (Wang and Zhang 2010). Local governments tried to avoid any limitations on new borrowing by using technicalities in the published guidelines and used new financial tools, such as corporate bonds, to make up for the regulatory crunch.

The leadership change that took place at the end of 2012 and the volatility caused by the world economic recovery have affected the capacity of the CBRC to implement measures necessary to decisively tackle the local government debt problem. In the Chinese political system, a leadership change at the top consequently entails staff changes at all government levels, government agencies and SOEs. Almost all of the stakeholders in the LGFP debt problem were affected by this change, including the CBRC, the CEOs of the "big four" banks, local government officials and central government leadership. The local government officials who were soon to leave their posts did not have much incentive to decrease their borrowing while the newly appointed local government officials announced ambitious spending plans to spur growth. With no incentives to cut spending, local government debt increased by 70 per cent from the end of 2010 to June 2013, according to the latest National Audit Office (NOA) report on local government debt (Mitchell 2013).

The soar in the local government debt in less than three years indicates the inability of regulatory authorities to control the risk-taking of banks and local governments. Despite the CBRC's incentive to act as the "benevolent supervisor" in the regulatory system, the "agents" were able to expand credit with high risks. This would not have been possible without the intervention of the "principal", which had an incentive to avoid any sharp decreases in growth, hence it showed leniency towards the banks. The slow and unstable recovery of the world economy has contributed to the relatively slow growth in China, and falling inflation made the principal – the central government – prioritize growth over other concerns. The impact of monetary loosening by means of non-traditional monetary policy

tools such as bank reserve-requirement ratios and lending targets for the banks removed some of the urgency of solving the debt problem for local governments and banks. The new CBRC leadership appointed at the end of 2011 initially approached the problem with a heavy hand; however, it later had to accommodate the demands of the central government, which was not in favour of cutting the available credit to the local governments at once (Li 2013). As an official from the CBRC said to a reporter in mid-2012, "this was a natural decision for the CBRC, as stabilizing economic growth has become government's top priority" (*China Daily* 2012). The CBRC had to accommodate the principal's objectives, such as encouraging banks to lend to local governments for affordable housing projects (see CBRC 2011a) while trying to mitigate risks at LGFPs.

The currently slowing Chinese economy and the central government's efforts to control rising property prices have clearly decreased the capacity of the local governments, which rely heavily on land sales for revenues, to service their debt. Hence, the possibility of default by the LGFPs is posing a real threat to the stability of the banking system. The local governments are counting on the central government to bail them out. Although the central government has not clearly addressed how it intends to approach local government debt, it signalled that it will be ready to provide support by allowing local AMCs to be established, which can help to diffuse the issue, just like China did 15 years ago with the big state banks. We have already witnessed the establishment of local AMCs to buy bad debt from the local governments in the leading economic centres of the country like Shanghai, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Anhui with approval from the CBRC (Collier 2014). Their numbers increased very recently with new AMCs in Beijing, Tianjin, Chongqing, Fujian and Liaoning (Li 2014), and other local governments are in line to set up such companies to off-load bank NPLs and bad assets.

Moreover, the latest audit report from the NOA suggests that a huge part of the debt that was supposed to mature by the end 2013 was refinanced (Rabinovitch 2014), indicating rollover of existing debt obligations rather than pushing for a "harder" budget. Still, the responsibility to avoid a large-scale default lies with the CBRC, which has tried since mid-2009 to take appropriate steps to prevent the problem getting even bigger. However, either the steps taken by the CBRC were circumvented by the banks and LGFPs in some manner

or the central government's growth concerns guided the CBRC's actions.

In the case of local government debt, the central government again preferred lax regulation. First, the central government did not want to further weaken local economies. Second, strict controls in new loans would decrease capacity to service existing debt for outgoing local party bosses and constrain new local party leaders from starting new investments. The retiring party leaders seeking post-transition influence could not risk alienating incumbent local party leaders, while the new leaders could not afford to lose the support of the new local cadres. Hence, by its inaction, the central government set its preference for regulatory forbearance on the local government debt issue, and the CBRC – once again, as a dependent regulatory authority – followed the government. The political assets produced by regulatory forbearance in the case of local government debt outweighed the risks of regulatory failure for the central government. The incentives not to fix the local government debt problem were greater for the "principal" and bank managements, which were in a period of flux. The CBRC had to follow along with the collusion among the central government and the local governments by taking accommodating regulatory actions. Once again, the principal favoured the banks and their clients despite the risks pointed out by the supervisor.

Wealth-Management Products

The growing amount of wealth-management products offered by banks in China is another source of risk for the banking system. The interest rate controls in the country cause investors to shy away from banks and look for higher real returns in other markets. To attract investors, banks often offer unregulated or lightly regulated financial products that can be kept off of balance sheets and offer better returns for the investors. The value of these products in the Chinese banking system reached 13 trillion CNY – 14.5 per cent of total banking deposits – by the end of 2012, according to Fitch Ratings. Official numbers, however, suggest that the value of wealth-management products in the banking system increased by 15.5 per cent in the first quarter of 2013, reaching 8.2 trillion CNY (Xiao 2013). This rapid rise in wealth-management products can be explained, first, by the fierce competition among banks to increase their market share

and by the pressure on bank employees to reach growing sales targets each month. Second, customers seeking slightly better returns than the bank deposit rates, reassured by positive stories from their friends, family members and neighbours, show a huge interest in these products. Considering that a Chinese customer will receive 2.85 per cent interest on a three-month deposit, while a wealth-management product can offer between a 4 and 5 per cent return for a one-month or an even shorter-term investment, wealth-management products are quite attractive. Last, besides individuals, more and more public companies are using wealth-management products as investment vehicles (*Caijing* 2013).

However, the projects and assets involved in these products are not always transparent or risk-free, putting investor funds at risk. At the end of 2012, a group of small investors found out that their investments tied to a wealth-management product, marketed by a commercial bank, were lost. It was revealed that the dodgy companies that received investors' funds misused them and defaulted. The bank did not accept any responsibility for the losses of its customers and left them to pursue action against the companies on their own (Shen and Li 2012). Another potentially serious risk is the maturity mismatch between the interest payments of the short-term wealth-management products and the long-term payback structures of the projects the funds are lent to. Banks paying wealth-management products' interest payments with deposits from the sales of new wealth-management products is actually a Ponzi scheme.

The risks associated with wealth-management products in China are often overlooked by bank customers looking for better returns for their hard-earned savings. The risks are also expressed casually by the bank staff, who are often under pressure to reach sales targets. Some banks even ask their loan-seeking customers to buy wealth-management products as a condition of loan approvals. The quality of the assets and the rate of growth are especially alarming in smaller and regional banks, which try to compete with larger commercial banks in attracting customers. The CBRC initially rebuffed the need to regulate wealth-management products, because they were affecting a very limited number of wealthy individuals. Later, Chinese consumers lacking the funds to qualify to invest in these products became innovative. They started gathering funds privately from colleagues or family members but bought the product under one name (Soh and

Flaherty 2012). With similar innovations, wealth-management products have become widely available in the market, and small investors have become vulnerable, too.

Unlike half-hearted regulatory efforts in the cases of Wenzhou and LGFPs, the CBRC's approach to wealth-management product regulation has been swift. The CBRC issued stricter regulations to prevent banks expanding their wealth-management products and hiding the risk (CBRC 2013). Banks were also warned not to withhold information from their customers about the risks associated with the products they purchase. The banks were even asked to record their sales processes on video to prove that they have adequately informed their customers about the risks involved with the products (CBRC Shanghai Branch 2013). As a result of this vigorous regulatory activity, it became harder to sell wealth-management products. The products with high risks and high returns had to be transformed into moderately risky products. One bank manager from Beijing had this to say about sales of wealth-management products:

> Last year or even in the first half of this year, I was embarrassed to call a product with less than a 5 per cent return a high-yield product. Now products with more than a 5 per cent return are very rare (Jin 2013).

With stricter regulations, the number of wealth-management products offered by banks has also decreased.

In the case of wealth-management products, the CBRC was much more assertive and used its regulatory capacity decisively, unlike in the previous two cases discussed in this article. This can be explained by the central government's low level of interest in the issue, as wide-scale rent distribution was absent. However, regulatory failure could increase the risk of political instability if investors suffered huge losses. The central government, in the case of wealth-management products, favoured strong regulation, allowing the CBRC to take tough regulatory action. When the principal's objective of maintaining social stability was in line with the supervisor's mandate of less risk-taking in the banking sector, the agents were unable to capture the regulatory process. The non-existent regulatory framework for wealth-management products has been primarily shaped by the principal and supervisor. Banks as agents had to adjust their practices according to those preferences.

Conclusion

Comparing the three cases of financial risk management by the CBRC, we can conclude that the CBRC's approach to fulfilling its obligation to oversee the stability of the banking system varies depending on the actors involved and the central government's policy objectives. As Table 1 illustrates, when the central government is highly interested in the issue and sets its preference for lax or strong regulation, the CBRC follows the principal's lead. In the Wenzhou mini-crisis, although the CBRC wanted to continue its prudent approach to supervision, the central government's intervention pushed the CBRC to become more lenient towards banks. In the case of loans to local government platforms, despite the CBRC's efforts, both the local governments and the banks circumvented regulations and gained the central government's tacit approval to do so. In regulating the wealth-management products, although the CBRC faced challenges from the banks to its regulatory authority, it was able to push back and exert strong control regarding these products. Unlike the previous cases, the involvement of depositors and the rise in their numbers pushed the CBRC to act decisively. The possibility of social unrest created by victims of shoddy financial products has given the CBRC an extra incentive to act promptly. The central government supported strong regulatory action and the CBRC's approach, although subsequent political gains were low.

Table 1: Regulatory Behaviour of the CBRC

Issue	Government Interest	Government Preference	Regulatory Behaviour
SME Lending	High	Lax Regulation	Regulatory Capture
Local Government Debt	High	Lax Regulation	Regulatory Forbearance
Consumer Protection	Low	Strong Regulation	Regulatory Action

Source: Authors' own compilation.

The CBRC and its staff cannot act independently, as they have to follow policy guidelines and signals from the party leadership to keep their current jobs and secure prestigious promotions in the future. On the other hand, the CBRC is not completely captured by bank

interests and tries to keep its scorecard good in terms of preventing banking crises and sharp rises in NPLs. The agency also pushes for the adoption of international regulatory standards such as Basel III in an effort to keep the banking system stable despite the government's intervention.

Overall, the principal-supervisor-agent model in China is not producing efficiency-increasing regulatory outcomes; instead, it is creating accommodating policies for the banks and the central government. The risks associated with banking activities are forwarded to future bureaucratic cadres, while the banks continue their operations under an implicit bail-out guarantee from the central government. The principal and the agents collude when the principal's objectives other than regulatory prudence are given priority. The CBRC, as the supervisor, acts with limited authority and selectively supervises the banking industry, complying with demands of the principal and its mandate. Banking regulation in China illustrates the Chinese regulatory state model in which one-party rule weakens regulatory capacity yet provides political outcomes favourable to party members involved as principals, supervisors or agents. Hence, the CBRC is a dependent regulatory authority which has to perform well in order to survive despite the constrictions presented by the political institutions surrounding it.

Although no cases of collusion between the agents and the supervisor were presented in this paper, information asymmetries and political patronage – especially at the local level – carry a risk that the banking sector problems will be concealed from the state. This risk, however, is diminished as the new leadership views the banking sector risks as too big to ignore. The central government is watching the CBRC and the banks more closely and seeking more information in regards to their activities, which is decreasing the information asymmetry between the principal and the supervisor. Once heightened awareness of banking sector risks subsides and bank regulation slides out of the government agenda, we can expect the risk of collusion between the supervisor and agents to reappear.

The principal-supervisor-agent framework in China is reproduced within the institutional settings of the country's political system. The local–centre dichotomy and the hierarchical relationships are sustained while the information asymmetries between the parties increase or decrease depending on the performance requirements of

the principal from the supervisor and the agents. Within the P-S-A framework, the central government enters into separate contracts with the supervisor and agents, allowing it to demand different regulatory outcomes from each contract when necessitated by political objectives. The contractual outcomes favoured by the government are accepted by both the supervisor and the agents. Further research should thoroughly investigate the P-S-A framework and its characteristics, which have been shaped by Chinese political institutions in other regulatory areas in which the government delegates its authority to bureaucratic organizations.

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