

Maria Repnikova, *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 264pp. \$99.99 hardback.

Maria Repnikova's book examines the politics of China's media in the Hu-Wen era. In it, she synthesizes insights from over a hundred interviews with journalists, editors, media specialists, and party and state officials, and combines that with her extensive reading of and on the Chinese media. Such a wealth of detail often results in works that lose the reader as they enumerate endless contingencies, complexities, and subtleties. Repnikova fortunately manages to embrace this richness while still coming to a conclusion that is clear enough that it could conceivably be proven wrong (although I believe she is right).

Specifically, she argues that despite the complex interactions in any given instance the party-state remains the dominant player in media politics, setting the rules of the game. Journalists make their own choices within this framework but largely accept it as fixed, engaging in "improvisation" rather than "resistance." This contrasts with the idea of crusading journalists as a force of liberalization struggling with a state that is totalitarian in aspiration even if not in practice.

So if Chinese journalists are not pen-wielding freedom fighters, what are they? In Repnikova's telling, they appear as pragmatic participants in the party's project, accepting that their role is to help the party govern better, not to oppose it. In their reporting, they avoid the red zones (topics like Tibet, Taiwan, and Tiananmen) and instead try to draw the party's attention to social problems and to aid in central oversight of local authorities. While they may be critical, their criticism is largely restricted to local authorities and specific outcomes. To be sure, ambitious reporters at some outlets may venture into grey zones. But they do so knowing that negative consequences will not be too extreme. Thus even for these crusaders, the expected reaction of central party-state is the crucial factor shaping their choices.

Two case study chapters illustrate this dynamic in the context of specific crises—the school collapses during the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, and the recurring problem with fatal coal mining accidents. In both of these cases, journalists were able to investigate and report as long as they limited the scope to localized events and stopped when central authorities told them to.

A chapter on China's neighbor to the north provides a useful contrast. It shows how under Gorbachev and under Putin Moscow's authoritarians have also tolerated independent media voices, but with tactics and outcomes that diverge sharply from each other and from contemporary China.

Repnikova wisely keeps her main focus on the Hu-Wen era ending in 2012 for most of the book, but addresses developments in the ongoing Xi Jinping era in the final chapter. While she acknowledges the indications of tightening of party control over the media, she contends that the interactions between the party-state and the media still fit the same basic framework. This conclusion is perhaps less surprising when one considers that her depiction of the previous period already places the party in the decisive role, holding the ability to impose its own views of what topics can and cannot be reported at any given moment.

My only criticism of the book is its reliance entirely on Beijing-based fieldwork. As a purposeful selection strategy makes a lot of sense, since the most renowned and boundary-pushing journalists are mostly based there—if they appear largely resigned to working within the system we should not expect it elsewhere. In addition, while they are based in Beijing they range nationally in the course of their reporting and shape the national media environment. However, by not going beyond the ring roads there is always the risk of being captured by the elite discourse and missing out on important phenomena emerging elsewhere.

Overall this is an excellent book, showing the crucial role that intensive field interviewing still plays in the study of Chinese politics. Although there are several worthy competitors, I suspect it will prove to be the one essential reading summing up media politics in the Hu-Wen era. While theoretically sophisticated, it is written in an accessible and engaging style, making it suitable for advanced undergraduates in Asian studies, communication, and political science as well as academics in any discipline.

(692 words)

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