

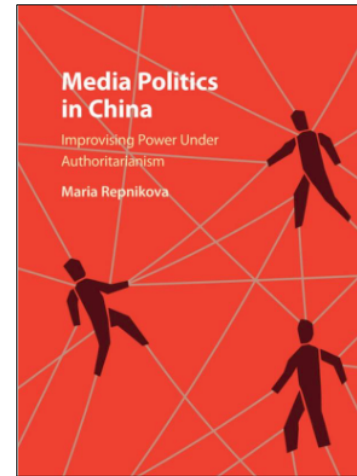
Maria Repnikova, **Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism**, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 272 pp., \$99.99 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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The nature of journalism in authoritarian countries is a subject of increasing interest to scholars, especially in the context of mass communication and journalism studies. As global governance trends away from pure democracy toward authoritarianism, strong autocracies like China provide models of how press–government relations could take shape. As a major global power, China’s governance is also interesting in its own right, and it is largely on those terms that Maria Repnikova engages the practice of critical journalism in contemporary China. With **Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism**, Repnikova contributes a thorough and detailed argument about the ways critical journalism is constructed through an improvisational relationship between state authorities and Chinese journalists. While she extends the argument to draw out some important comparisons with Russia and with developments over time in China, the focus of the text is on precise descriptions of critical, contemporary Chinese journalism and quotes from Chinese journalists, and this is its main contribution to media studies.



The book draws on 12 months of fieldwork and interviews with 120 subjects, including journalists, observers, and officials, conducted from 2008 to 2016. The interviews are supplemented with textual analysis of documents, including news coverage and party newsletters. Repnikova uses these data to paint an intricately detailed picture of the actions and function of journalism in China, focusing especially on the relationships between critical journalists and state authorities under the Hu-Wen regime. The book opens with theoretical background, situating the text in terms of comparative authoritarianism and the roles of journalists in such states and presenting China as a case study of an authoritarian state. Part II examines the many mechanisms of coordination that exist between critical journalists and party officials in routine reporting situations, and Part III shows how critical journalists covered (and attempted to cover) two disasters—comparing and contrasting a natural disaster, the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, with coverage of a number of human-caused coal mining disasters from 2003 to 2012. The book concludes in Part IV with a brief comparison of China’s media system to that of Russia and an account of recent developments in China under Xi Jinping’s leadership.

Repnikova’s main argument, to which she returns throughout the book, is that critical journalism in China is practiced in a space of ambiguity, a “narrow grey zone demarcated by the party” (p. 12) that centers primarily around local authorities and is quickly curtailed if journalists extend their critical gaze to central or national party leadership. Critical journalism practiced within these boundaries functions as a tool of the state to enforce party governance. Journalists have a role in the party, facilitating strong governance

in the decentralized authoritarian state, rather than filling a role of opposition to the government (as is done, for instance, in Russia).

Content produced by Chinese journalists is monitored and guided by a number of methods. Government organizations, notably the Central Propaganda Department and the General Administration for Press and Publication, coordinate government messaging, oversee media content, steer media policy, and license media outlets. Repnikova points out that these “top-down” methods of control have been studied widely, especially in political science and China or Asian studies contexts; she focuses instead on what she calls a “bottom-up” approach, examining how particular restrictions on sensitive content are negotiated between journalists and officials on a case-by-case basis. Strategies used in this improvisational space include censorship of various kinds, communicated via directives from the Central Propaganda Department (often unexpected and communicated after a reporter has begun working on a story); limited access to information or sources needed to complete a story on a sensitive topic; postpublication pressure to delete stories; official warnings that reporting has crossed a line; and dismissal of employees. These strategies, as journalists recounted them to Repnikova, are fraught with uncertainty and unpredictability, as opposed to the official top-down messaging that communicates a fairly stable set of expectations and restrictions.

The uncertainty continues as journalists encounter specific situations in their reporting. Repnikova focuses on a few major disasters, pointing out that before 2000, disaster reporting was not tolerated at all by the Chinese government. It still constitutes an extremely sensitive situation, though it is allowed because social media makes complete disaster coverups impossible and leads to worse image crises than does favorably managed disaster coverage. In general, Repnikova finds that journalists are allowed to cover natural disasters and trace blame to local political authorities, though they face varying degrees of resistance from those authorities. Critical coverage tends to be more closely watched, controlled, and curtailed when the central state is implicated in a failure.

Situating the study within the Chinese political and cultural system allows Repnikova to show how journalism is framed and imagined in an authoritarian context without relying on comparisons with the framework of journalism in democratic or Western societies. Indeed, in a final chapter comparing Chinese critical journalism with critical journalism produced in Russia, she observes directly that Chinese political discourse in general tends to ignore Western frameworks. The media supervision role of the governing party “does not invoke nor react to western ideals, but rather speaks to internal governance challenges, including vertical accountability and public opinion management” (pp. 191–192). The way this study meets China on its own terms is exemplary for scholars of mass communication and journalism. In journalism studies, scholars have highlighted the need for studies that situate journalism in local contexts, both to empirically de-Westernize the field and also to enhance theoretical approaches to understanding journalism in nondemocratic political systems.

The book is framed to be of most interest to scholars of Chinese politics, providing a thorough and detailed account of the intricacies of message management at the implementation level in a decentralized authoritarian state. Concluding chapters draw comparative and historical lessons about the range of orientations and behaviors available to journalists within strong authoritarian governance. The narrative flow and structure generally focus on the details of China’s political system rather than drawing out

theoretical applications for journalism scholars. The concluding chapters draw compelling comparisons between authoritarian systems, contrasting the case with Russia's media control system and providing a historical analysis of shifts within the Chinese government. These comparisons add depth to the analysis and could have been even longer to further enrich the text.

Journalism studies and mass communication scholars will also find the book insightful, though they might be disappointed with the limited theoretical development around journalists' improvisational behaviors and their engagement with government control. The descriptive focus takes the place of a broader discussion about the implications of these practices, either on the current state of the journalism field in China or on its future development—and what those might offer to journalism studies in other authoritarian contexts. Near the end of the book, Repnikova writes that "Chinese journalists position themselves as pseudo-partners of the central state" (p. 197) and aim to reform from within. More detail on how and to what extent journalists embrace this role and actually position themselves as such would have enriched the book further; this is an area researchers should continue to explore.

Media Politics in China will be a useful text for graduate students and researchers interested in political control of China's media system or in authoritarian media control more broadly. Policymakers and observers, especially those focused on international affairs and politics in China, should also be interested in this text for the detailed assessment of political implementation.