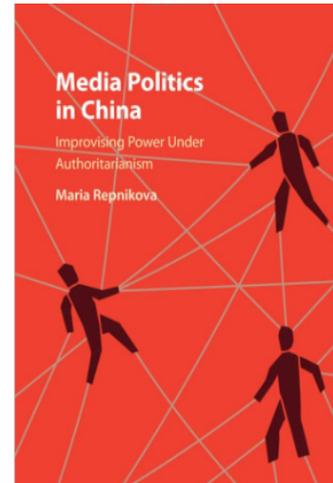


Maria Repnikova, **Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism**, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 272 pp., \$99.99 (hardcover).

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How can journalism be conducted in a nation where the entire media sector is under the purview of a one-party state? This simple question lies at the heart of Maria Repnikova's study of a special group of journalists operating in the People's Republic of China (PRC). These critical journalists do not constitute a unified community or collaborative group but are identifiable by virtue of their "pursuit of social justice and their quest to push the envelope of permissible reporting" (p. 4). While many are based in the media megacities of Beijing and Shanghai, working as freelancers within state media and at commercial media outlets, their journalism expands beyond their base cities to cover controversial social issues wherever they may arise. They are a minority amongst media professionals in China, yet also part of a broader configuration of social activists in China that includes "lawyers, non-governmental organization leaders and intellectuals" (p. 21).



In **Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism**, author Maria Repnikova employs qualitative methods including 120 interviews with media professionals, government officials, and academics, and textual analysis of three very different primary sources: the Communist Party's theoretical journal *Qiushi*, Guangzhou's *Nanfang Zhoumo* (Southern Weekly), and Beijing's *Caijing* (Finance and Economics), the latter two both prominent beacons of critical journalism in contemporary China. The media professionals interviewed come from across China's complex journalistic landscape, ranging from state media broadcasters such as China Central Television (CCTV) to commercial media outlets such as *Nanfang Zhoumo* and *Caijing*.

The entry point for Repnikova's exploration of critical journalism is to challenge the "popular depiction of Chinese media . . . which exudes no tolerance towards its critics" (p. 3). Such a view, by its very nature, reifies all journalists in China as passive dupes of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and government of the PRC. Similarly, this view also reifies the Chinese state itself as a singular entity, bereft of any flexibility and pathologically determined to control what is reported, with no tolerance for critical voices. This somewhat stereotypical view of Chinese journalism is, as Repnikova acknowledges, grounded firmly in the reality of a highly restricted media system operating at the behest of the one-party state. Yet it also constitutes a demonstrably problematic characterization that oversimplifies several features of China's media sector: the journalists operating in China; the party and government officials with whom they must interact; the tension between central and local government; and the shifting terrain and environment in which both journalists and officials must maneuver.

Building on an engaging introductory chapter, Repnikova lays out her analytical perspective and theoretical innovations in chapter 2. It is here that she introduces two concepts characterizing the nature of state-media relations at the periphery of acceptable reporting in authoritarian contexts: *guarded improvisation* and *fluid collaboration*. While these concepts have clearly been developed as a result of in-depth research, Repnikova presents them first, then delves into the data from which they emerged in chapters 3 and 4, indicating that hers is a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Holt, 2005) that seeks to develop new theory from the data, rather than applying a theoretical lens from the outset.

Repnikova analyzes political responses and critical journalism in relation to the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan province (chapter 5), and a series of coal mining disasters covered by *Nanfang Zhoumo*, *Caijing*, and other outlets between 2003 and 2010 (chapter 6). Chapter 7 provides analysis of the critical journalists who were directly challenging the state prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union under Gorbachev, then considers the manifestations of critical journalism in Putin's Russian Federation. Both provide alternative perspectives that reinforce the applicability of Repnikova's theoretical and conceptual innovations in explaining critical journalism across different authoritarian contexts where press freedom is not fully enshrined in law, either in theory or in practice.

Repnikova's final chapter addresses the question of future trajectories in critical journalism. While research was conducted during the Hu Jintao era, spanning from 2002 to 2012, the impact of the expansion and intensification of CCP supervision over the state and commercial media sectors must necessarily be addressed. Repnikova accomplishes this with aplomb. Firstly, she acknowledges the perceived regression that has characterized Xi Jinping's first term (2012-2017), including state diktats issued during a prominent tour of state media outlets in February 2016, that all media, including "flagship party media, competitive commercial outlets (and) the vibrant social media sphere" should be "unified by the objective of 'correct guidance' of public opinion" (p. 210). Yet, she argues persuasively that the Xi administration's stricter and more coercive control of the media, while representing a definite shift that further favors the state over the critical journalist, does not constitute a fundamental transformation of state-media relations. This shift, she argues, will increase the importance of *guarded improvisation* and *fluid collaboration* while increasing risk for both officials and critical journalists. The implications of alterations to these media structures will in all likelihood lead to ever more creative and anticipatory maneuvering by both media and state actors.

Repnikova's exploration of crisis events provides a vivid landscape in which the nuances and subtlety of state-media relations become apparent. For example, chapter 6 covers critical journalism by examining 33 reports from five commercial media outlets (p. 158) regarding mining incidents across 12 different provinces and two autonomous regions, each with more than 30 fatalities, totalling 2310 deaths among them (p. 144). Tensions between local and central government are revealed, with critical journalists having to balance the competing desires of local officials to obscure their complicity and corrupt relationships with mining companies, and of the central government to be perceived as responsive. Critical journalists employ a range of techniques to draw attention to issues, yet simultaneously transfer risk associated with directly criticizing or apportioning blame to state-owned companies, local officials, or central government. They achieve this through myriad strategies and tactics, including refraining from directly naming officials involved; portraying the central government as both decisive and responsive; and

framing of criticism through constructive suggestions. This last technique is realized through discursive coverage involving interviews with academics, legal experts, and researchers from China's state think-tank sector, including those attached to State Council research centers.

These types of strategic and tactical maneuvers represent what Repnikova terms *guarded improvisations* on the part of critical journalists. This term has similarities to that of "structured improvisation" discussed by Craig Calhoun (2003, p. 292) in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Repnikova's innovation is to add a sense of trepidation to more clearly characterize the risk posed to her subject matter by the authoritarian context in which it operates. Yet both Calhoun's and Repnikova's uses of the term *improvisation* are designed to capture the manner in which agency can respond in potentially infinite ways to various structural conditions under which actors must operate, and to address what Bourdieu identifies as a major challenge of the social sciences: bridging the antimony between structure and agency.

The informality of these structures in contemporary China is a key feature. Whereas legal frameworks provide clear lines for journalists to navigate in more liberal contexts, boundaries of acceptable reporting in authoritarian systems are more diffuse and constantly changing. It is this aspect of state-media interactions that requires the development of Repnikova's concept of *fluid collaboration*. This leads to mutually beneficial outcomes for both the state and critical journalists. The state dominates this collaboration, leading its direction and ensuring favourable outcomes. Critical journalists proactively and reactively take advantage of openings presented to them in a dual process that sees them individually bring attention to social justice issues, yet also sees their reporting collectively contribute to consensus building.

As discussed above, there are clear similarities with Bourdieu's existing social theory in the concepts devised to frame Repnikova's analysis. How the activity of critical journalism would contribute to what Bourdieu terms *symbolic power* and *symbolic violence* (Wacquant & Ackcaoglu, 2017) would also be a very interesting discussion. There are also clear parallels between Repnikova's thesis and the work of Antonio Gramsci. In fact, the first chapter begins with a quote from Roger Simons on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony as ". . . a relation not of dominance by means of force, but of consent by means of political and ideological leadership. It is the organization of consent" (Simons, 2001, p. 2). Gramsci's concept of hegemony is not revisited directly, and the term "hegemony" is used sparingly throughout the book; however, Repnikova does forward an argument that an unintended consequence of critical journalism is to contribute, via its portrayal of central government responsiveness to various crises, to the reinforcement of state legitimacy. That this is achieved while also shining a light on local government failings and corruption encapsulates the articulation of interests that characterize the concept of *fluid collaboration*.

While Repnikova's eschewing of existing theories to frame her analysis may frustrate those of us who prefer such an approach, the author's decision to adopt grounded theory liberates her work from disciplinary pigeonholing. In addition, it creates an opening for discussion of her valuable work across those disciplinary boundaries, answering questions and generating new ones that fellow researchers operating in different academic fields may take forward.

Moreover, as Hall (1987) famously claimed, Gramsci does not provide us with any answers, but enables us to ask the right questions. Repnikova's work develops her own theoretical concepts and clearly adopts a critical line of enquiry. She avoids problem-solving questions such as when will a free press emerge in China?, instead addressing the far more important considerations: to what extent and by what means is investigative journalism capable of raising awareness on social justice issues within contemporary China's authoritarian context? How is critical journalism in China likely to develop and transform under the apparently increasing authoritarianism of the Xi administration?

While fully acknowledging the structural limitations placed on these critical journalists operating in contemporary China, this timely contribution not only challenges assumptions about the nature of journalism in the PRC and of the relationship between media and the Chinese state, it also paints an animated image of a delicate, improvised choreography between critical journalists and state actors operating in an environment characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, and constant flux. Critical journalists, operating at the boundaries of acceptable reportage in China's authoritarian context, must carefully anticipate the maneuvers of those officials through whom the opportunities for such reportage materialize. Similarly, officials must select moments when it is politically expedient to put critical journalists into play. Repnikova's grounded theory approach, and the resulting concepts of *guarded improvisation* and *fluid collaboration*, brilliantly capture the tension of this high-stakes ballet wherein neither participant knows the music or the dance moves, but the music never stops, the tempo and pitch shift without warning, and the first one to put a foot wrong may well have to exit stage left.

Repnikova's work extends beyond a limited and narrow focus on media-government relations to deliver several notable achievements. Firstly, from a sociological perspective, this work reintroduces structure and agency to the analysis of journalists operating at the limits of acceptable reportage in authoritarian contexts. Secondly, from a media and journalism perspective, the author explores the way in which these superior-subordinate structural relationships between the state and the media frame the proactive and reactive agency of both officials and reporters, providing a nuanced account of how this impacts journalism and reporting in China. Thirdly, from a political perspective, the role and function of these journalists as progenitors of both social activism and consensus to state legitimacy is carefully argued and subtly documented.

This monograph should appeal to scholars working across a range of disciplines, including journalism, media and communications, cultural studies, politics and sociology. Those exploring prominent issues in contemporary China will find a rich source of data and detailed interpretative analysis that provides insights across many areas. These include media censorship and self-censorship; the interplay between state and commercial media; central and local government relations; the state and civil society; and activism for social justice under authoritarian conditions. In addition to being of interest to academics for research purposes, this book will undoubtedly also find its way onto many reading lists for courses in area studies, journalism, media, communication, and, potentially, politics and sociology. It is research of the highest quality: meticulous, critical, persuasive, creative, and provocative.

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