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**Guiding public protest: assessing the propaganda model of
China's hybrid newspaper industry**

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**GUIDING PUBLIC PROTEST:
ASSESSING THE PROPAGANDA
MODEL OF CHINA'S HYBRID
NEWSPAPER INDUSTRY**

*Three case studies: the 2007 Xiamen PX Protest, the 2008
Chongqing Taxi Strike and the 2011 Wukan Land Protest*

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Westminster for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents an account and analysis of published mainland Chinese media coverage surrounding three major events of public protest during the Hu-Wen era (2003-2013). The research makes a qualitative analysis of printed material drawn from a range of news outlets, differentiated by their specific political and commercial affiliations. The goal of the research is to better understand the role of mainstream media in social conflict resolution, a hitherto under-studied area, and to identify gradations within the ostensibly monolithic mainland Chinese media on issues of political sensitivity. China's modern media formation displays certain characteristics of Anglophone media at its hyper-commercialised, populist core. However, the Chinese state retains an explicit, though often ambiguous, remit to engage with news production. Because of this, Chinese newspapers are often assumed to be one-dimensional propaganda 'tools' and, accordingly, easily dismissed from analyses of public protest. This research finds that, in an area where political actors have rescinded their monopoly on communicative power, a result of both policy decisions and the rise of Internet-based media platforms, established purveyors of news have acquired greater latitude to report on hitherto sensitive episodes of conflict but do so under the burden of having to correctly guide public opinion. The thesis examines the discursive resources that are deployed in this task, as well as reporting patterns which are suggestive of a new propaganda approach to handling social conflict within public media. Beside the explicitly political nature of coverage of protest events, the study sheds lights on gradations within China's complex, hybrid media landscape both in terms of institutional purpose and qualitative performance.

Keywords: China media; China commercial media; China protest; China newspapers; authoritarian resilience

Contents

| | |
|---|------------------|
| <i>Title Page</i> | <i>1</i> |
| <i>Abstract.....</i> | <i>2</i> |
| <i>Contents</i> | <i>3</i> |
| <i>List of Tables and Images</i> | <i>10</i> |
| <i>A Note on Romanization.....</i> | <i>10</i> |
| <i>Preface</i> | <i>11</i> |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | <i>12</i> |
| <i>Author's Declaration</i> | <i>13</i> |
| <i>Chapter 1: Introduction</i> | <i>14</i> |
| The problem statement and research questions..... | 14 |
| Theoretical background | 18 |
| Aims and methods | 20 |
| Main Findings | 24 |
| Revisions..... | 27 |
| Approach | 28 |
| Value of research | 31 |
| Structure of the thesis..... | 31 |
| <i>Chapter 2: The Chinese Press in Context</i> | <i>33</i> |
| Introduction..... | 33 |
| The Chinese Press in Historical Context | 33 |
| The Early Press | 33 |
| The Republican and Early Communist Press | 36 |
| The Propaganda Model of the Chinese Press | 37 |
| The Press During Reform and Opening Up | 40 |
| Liberalisation in the 1980s | 40 |
| The Market and the Party, Post 1989 | 41 |
| Continued political control of the press | 42 |

| | |
|---|------------------|
| Public Opinion 'Guidance' and 'Channelling' | 45 |
| Commercial Newspapers: From Within or Without? | 46 |
| Professionalisation | 50 |
| Summary | 53 |
| <i>Chapter 3: Social Contention in China</i> | <i>54</i> |
| Introduction | 54 |
| Protest in China | 54 |
| Protest in Historical Context | 54 |
| Democracy and Authoritarianism | 56 |
| Rights Consciousness | 57 |
| Protest in authoritarian adaptation | 58 |
| The Historical-Cultural Approach | 61 |
| Social management | 62 |
| Protest and the countryside | 63 |
| Urban and Intellectual Protest | 65 |
| Protest repertoires | 66 |
| Protest and the media | 68 |
| Protest and the Chinese media | 68 |
| Protest and the Anglophone media | 69 |
| Summary | 72 |
| The Chinese Internet | 73 |
| Introduction | 73 |
| The Chinese Web in Historical Context | 74 |
| Scale and Reach | 76 |
| The Chinese Internet as a Space 'Apart' | 76 |
| Ways of looking at the internet in China | 77 |
| The Liberation Discourse | 78 |
| A Networked Public Sphere? | 80 |
| The Authoritarian Adaptation Discourse | 83 |
| Censorship Practices | 85 |
| The non-political web – development and identity politics | 88 |
| Summary | 89 |
| Literature Review Summary | 90 |
| <i>Chapter 4: Analytical Framework</i> | <i>91</i> |
| Introduction | 91 |

| | |
|---|-------------------|
| Post-communist transition theory..... | 92 |
| Transitology..... | 93 |
| Axes of Contemporary Fragmentation..... | 94 |
| Public vs. Private: Corporate Authoritarianism | 94 |
| Central vs. Local: Regionally Decentralized Authoritarianism (RDA)..... | 95 |
| Theorising the media along multiple fracture lines | 98 |
| Responsive Authoritarianism | 100 |
| Active and Experimental | 101 |
| Listening and responsiveness | 103 |
| Authoritarian Press Theory | 106 |
| Introduction | 106 |
| Orientation to press functionalism | 107 |
| Theories of the press..... | 108 |
| The Four Theories of the Press | 108 |
| Authoritarian Press Theory | 109 |
| Soviet Press Theory | 110 |
| Libertarian and Social Responsibility Models | 111 |
| Conceptualising continuum | 112 |
| Comparing Media Systems and Corporate Authoritarianism | 114 |
| Language and ideology in China media discourse | 116 |
| An orientation to the importance of language in China | 116 |
| The ‘dual-track’ language of political communications | 118 |
| Link’s ‘Official’ Chinese | 118 |
| Barne’s ‘Newspeak’ | 120 |
| Cognitive Dissonance – explanations and remedies | 121 |
| Social Ideologies and Discursive Appropriations | 122 |
| Chapter Summary | 125 |
| <i>Chapter 5: Methodology.....</i> | <i>126</i> |
| Introduction..... | 126 |
| Questions, hypothesis and theoretical assumptions | 126 |
| Research questions | 126 |
| Explanations | 127 |
| Theoretical Assumptions..... | 128 |
| Philosophical Assumptions..... | 129 |
| Positivism and post-positivism..... | 130 |
| Qualitative and quantitative methodologies | 132 |

| | |
|---|-------------------|
| Orientation to the philosophical context of this research project..... | 134 |
| Reflexivity..... | 135 |
| Research Chronology | 136 |
| Methods | 143 |
| Orientation..... | 143 |
| Research design | 144 |
| Case studies | 144 |
| Why newspapers? | 146 |
| Protest Events..... | 147 |
| Core Newspapers | 148 |
| Data Collection | 151 |
| Methods of Analysis | 152 |
| Limitations of design | 154 |
| <i>Chapter 6: The Xiamen PX Protest</i> | <i>156</i> |
| Background..... | 156 |
| Protest Narrative | 157 |
| The Protest in Historic Context..... | 160 |
| Narrative of Domestic Reporting..... | 161 |
| Phases of reporting | 161 |
| Phase 1: March 2007 (NPCCC meeting highlights case) | 161 |
| Phase 2: Late May 2007 (Online controversy builds, protest is threatened) | 162 |
| Phase 3: May 31 st , June 1 st 2007 (Project suspension announced)..... | 163 |
| Phase 4: June 2 nd – 3 rd 2007 (Street protests) | 163 |
| Phase 5: June 4 th – 26 th 2007 (The protest aftermath) | 163 |
| Propaganda Strategies | 165 |
| Xiamen Reporting..... | 165 |
| Explaining the project..... | 165 |
| Explaining the controversy..... | 165 |
| Explaining the suspension | 167 |
| Targeting the protestors | 169 |
| Reframing the protest | 174 |
| Extra-linguistic strategies | 178 |
| National Reporting..... | 179 |
| Summary | 183 |
| News Discourse Analysis – Xiamen Media | 187 |

| | |
|--|-------------------|
| The construction of 'us' and 'them' | 187 |
| The Press-Party 'we' | 187 |
| The local 'we' and the national 'them' | 188 |
| The expanding 'we' | 189 |
| Majorities and minorities | 189 |
| The construction of protestors | 191 |
| Understanding and 'understanding' | 191 |
| Deviance | 194 |
| News Discourse Analysis – National Media | 194 |
| The construction of 'us' and 'them' | 194 |
| Construction of protestors | 195 |
| Online Sources | 196 |
| Conclusions | 197 |
| Chapter Conclusions | 198 |
| <i>Chapter 7: The Chongqing Taxi Strike</i> | <i>200</i> |
| Protest Narrative | 200 |
| Context and significance | 201 |
| Analysis | 202 |
| Chongqing Media | 203 |
| Referencing the strike | 203 |
| Headlines | 205 |
| Chongqing Daily | 205 |
| Chongqing Morning Post | 207 |
| Chongqing Evening Post | 210 |
| Images | 212 |
| Explaining the strike | 215 |
| Non-Chongqing Reporting | 225 |
| Xinhua | 225 |
| Oriental Morning Post | 227 |
| The Southern Metropolis Daily | 233 |
| The People's Daily | 236 |
| Summary and Conclusions | 238 |
| <i>Chapter 8: The Wukan Protest</i> | <i>242</i> |
| Protest Narrative | 242 |

| | |
|---|-------------------|
| Administrative Orientation | 246 |
| The Protest in Historic Context | 248 |
| Narrative of Domestic Reporting | 252 |
| Phases of reporting | 252 |
| Phase 1 – September 2011 | 252 |
| Phase 2 – November 2011 | 253 |
| Phase 3 – December 10-15, 2011 | 253 |
| Phase 4 –December 20, 2011 – January 6, 2012 | 253 |
| Phase 5 – Spring 2012 | 254 |
| Analysis | 255 |
| Party Media Coverage | 255 |
| Shanwei Reporting | 255 |
| Stratified government | 255 |
| Government as active | 256 |
| Official harmony, village discord | 257 |
| Government as transparent | 258 |
| Extra-linguistic strategies | 259 |
| Southern Daily Coverage..... | 260 |
| People’s Daily Editorial..... | 262 |
| Labelling the ‘incident’ | 263 |
| Discourses | 265 |
| Vocabulary | 267 |
| Illegality and extremity | 268 |
| Commercial Media | 268 |
| Beijing News..... | 271 |
| Specialist press..... | 274 |
| Conclusions..... | 275 |
| <i>Chapter 9: Conclusions</i> | <i>278</i> |
| Introduction..... | 278 |
| Protest in the Media and Authoritarian Adaptation | 279 |
| Administrative fragmentation | 284 |
| Propaganda Strategies | 287 |
| Implications for Authoritarian Press Theory | 292 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| Contributions to Knowledge..... | 296 |
| Limitations and Future Research | 297 |
| <i>Appendix A: Key Xiamen Anti-PX Protest Translations.....</i> | 301 |
| China Newsweek..... | 301 |
| June 11 th , 2007 (See reference: Xie, 2007) | 301 |
| <i>Appendix B: Key Chongqing Taxi Strike Translations.....</i> | 304 |
| Southern Metropolis Daily | 304 |
| November 6 th , 2008 (See reference: Long, 2008) | 304 |
| <i>Appendix C: Key Wukan Land Protest Translations</i> | 310 |
| People's Daily | 310 |
| December 22 nd , 2011 (See reference: Zhang, 2008) | 310 |
| Beijing News | 311 |
| December 22 nd , 2011 (See reference: Long, 2011) | 311 |
| <i>Glossary</i> | 313 |
| Journalistic and Publishing Terms..... | 313 |
| Acronyms..... | 314 |
| <i>Primary Source References</i> | 315 |
| Xiamen | 315 |
| Chongqing..... | 318 |
| Wukan | 320 |
| <i>Secondary Source References</i> | 322 |

List of Tables and Images

| | |
|---|-----|
| TABLE 1: REPRESENTATION OF VERTICAL POWER STRUCTURES WITHIN CHINESE PRESS | 100 |
| IMAGE 1: XIAMEN DAILY, PAGE 2, 2ND JUNE, 2007 | 171 |
| IMAGE 2: XIAMEN DAILY'S PRIMARY PX PROTEST COVERAGE, JUN 1-3 | 179 |
| TABLE 2: CHONGQING DAILY TAXI STRIKE HEADLINES, NOV 4TH-7TH, 2008..... | 206 |
| TABLE 3: CHONGQING MORNING POST TAXI STRIKE HEADLINES, NOV 4TH-7TH, 2008 | 208 |
| TABLE 4: CHONGQING EVENING POST TAXI STRIKE HEADLINES, NOV 4TH-7TH, 2008 | 211 |
| IMAGE 3: CHONGQING MORNING POST, PAGE 17, NOVEMBER 6TH, 2008..... | 213 |
| IMAGE 4: CHONGQING DAILY, PAGE 2, NOVEMBER 7TH, 2008..... | 214 |
| IMAGE 5: CHONGQING EVENING POST, PAGE 2, NOVEMBER 6TH, 2008..... | 215 |

A Note on Romanization

This thesis uses the CCP-commissioned and widely-used 'pinyin' system of Romanization in nearly all situations. The only exceptions are those where older Wade-Giles renderings have entered the English lexicon to such an extent that using the pinyin equivalent would likely cause confusion. The Wade-Giles system of Romanization is still used in Taiwan today and has given us terms such as Kuomintang (referred to on page 36). This would be rendered as Guomindang using the pinyin method. Other notable examples of non-pinyin usage are the names of early 20th Century Chinese leaders Chiang Kai-shek (see page 156) and Sun Yat-sen (see pages 35 and 123). These both constitute Romanized renderings of Cantonese names (given names, as opposed to birth names). In pinyin, the names would appear, respectively, as Jiang Jieshi and Sun Yi Xian and would, the author suspects, be unlikely to be recognised by an English reader.

Preface

This project arose from a longstanding interest in the work of China's class of modern journalist and a desire to better understand their place in China's post-1978 transition. My interest in the two broadest academic fields implied by this curiosity – media and Sinology – was born primarily of personal rather than scholarly experience. I trained as a newspaper reporter in the first years of the last decade. At that time, the UK newspaper industry stood on the cusp of epochal change. Within months of ending my journalistic apprenticeship in 2002, I found myself living and working in China, a country palpably fidgeting within its own historical straightjacket.

Had I been able to predict the precise nature of the change to either media or China, I'd likely be on the cover of *Fortune* by now, rather than, as is the case, an impecunious middle-aged student who barely has the strength to sign off on his own PhD thesis. Rather, standing on the shores of history, as I was a decade ago, I fell into the kind of arrogance which, perhaps, only a PhD project can truly undo. My work within, and consumption of, the print media in both the UK and China gave me what I felt to be a lucid conception of the nature and function of news journalism. Likewise, the five years I ultimately spent in China spurred a warped sense of *ownership* over the country's history, culture and society. In 2010, prior to beginning my doctorate, I felt I *knew* China. I had spent time in all but three of its 27 provinces¹ and five out of its six municipalities²; I had lived for more than 18-months in one of its hyper-modern first tier cities, Shanghai, and more than three years in a small and fairly inauspicious third-tier city, Zhaoqing. I had worked within China's then-nascent English-language media; I had read widely on its history; and I felt preternaturally licenced to pontificate on its future.

These recent years of study and research have made me acutely aware of the naivety in my initial confidence in assuming to *know* either journalism or China. The

¹ The term 'province' is here used in its most expansive context and includes regions, like Guangdong, which are indeed official 'provinces', as well as others, like Guangxi or Tibet, which are administratively known as 'autonomous regions' but which nevertheless function as provinces in the sense they are large, geographically partitioned swathes of land and distinct economic and administrative units.

² The term 'municipality' here is, again, used in the most expansive sense and includes Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing, each a provincial-level 'municipality' in the strict sense, as well as the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau.

contingencies of both are far larger than I initially conceived, particularly when viewed through a global prism. Just as journalism changes on different platforms, in different geographical contexts and within varied industrial formations, so China appears endlessly protean when viewed through from near or afar, or from different domestic vantage points.

There is no shortage of Chinese fables on the perils of hubris and the virtues of humility; and it's no irony that many of them involve scholars. The folly of aspiring to expertise in the Chinese realm is more evident to me now than ever. I wish that I had better internalised Daniel Lynch's simple but truthful observation that "[h]ubris should always be left at the door when studying China" (2010: 496). Despite years spent on the ground in China, and further years spent in the library thinking about China, the profundity of this observation is still only becoming clear and the creeping feeling of knowing less the more I have studied has been occasionally troubling. However, it has led me to this point where I feel both the clarity of one who, to mangle the sentiments of Socrates, Confucius and Obe-wan Kenobe, at least *knows* that he does not know which, at the very least, sets me apart from the me of a decade ago. It has also fostered a stronger desire than ever to continue supping from the seemingly inexhaustible lake of Sinology.

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible were it not for the generous funding of the University of Westminster's China Media Centre and, specifically, the interventions of its director, professor Hugo de Burgh. I would like to recognise the help and support of Dr. Xin Xin, my Director of Studies, Professor Steven Barnett, my second supervisor, and PhD programme director Dr. Anthony McNicholas. All have shown impressive patience and powers of man-management. Lastly, I need to thank Professor Colin Sparks. Though his help with this project was indirect, the few meetings we shared were hugely important in fortifying my spirit and ambition.

My greatest debt is to my family. I have drawn strength from three separate generations in the pursuit of this doctorate. My children have allowed me to feel like the Indiana Jones-like hero-expert I dreamed of being at the outset, even during

those frequent episodes of feeling cowardly, lazy and intellectually blank. More importantly, they injected meaning into my life during a period when meaning – intellectual and metaphysical – has been highly elusive. I am forever indebted to my wife. It was her support that allowed me to even entertain the idea of getting this project started and it was her seemingly inexhaustible reserves of patience and kindness – and tolerance for poverty – which allowed me to ultimately crawl over the finishing line. Finally, my parents have been magnificent in their encouragement and practical support – not least in providing me a quiet and generally-warm workstation, as well as their ability to resist the finger-wagging that a son's impecuniosity usually earns – and probably deserves.

Ultimately, this PhD has been transformative in ways I could not have envisaged four years ago. The knowledge that I have gleaned is only a part, and perhaps even a lesser part, of this transformation. The experience has held a mirror up to my soul and, though the view has been disquieting at times, I am nevertheless privileged to have seen it.

Author's Declaration

I declare that all the material contained within this thesis is my own work.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The problem statement and research questions

This thesis examines and evaluates the role of the Chinese press through the prism of social contention. This somewhat immodest ambition requires a little unpacking.

Firstly, one must consider why the Chinese press should be of interest as a subject of study. It is vital that it is seen in terms of its context, as a scribe of, a mirror to, and a tool of *change* in contemporary China.

China is undergoing a transition which is unprecedented in many key metrics. The shifts from relative poverty to relative wealth; from a largely rural, agrarian society to a predominantly urban, industrial one; from insularity to internationalism; and from dogmatic governance to technocratic governance are all universally recognised. They are nevertheless highly contested. The transitological paradigm, as staked out chiefly by Fukuyama (1992), envisaged transition in China from Leninist authoritarianism to liberal democracy founded on representative democracy, private property and constitutionalism. Within this paradigm, a highly ideological school of Sinology has grown up, one that persists in certain quarters today. Its apogee came after the events of spring and early summer 1989, when the Communist Party of China faced down what it regarded as an existential threat and voting began in elections in Poland, heralding the beginning of the end of the Cold War and geopolitical bipolarity. As has been widely noted, the future at that time appeared easy to read. The subsequent success of the Chinese communist 'Party-state'³ in surviving this turbulent period and transforming both itself and China into an economic powerhouse and geopolitical superpower proved a huge puzzle for many. Those clinging to a transitological frame persist in asking questions of China which speculate on when the forces of liberalism will finally undo the dark forces of authoritarianism, or, more commonly, providing explanations for why they haven't, quite managed it yet. Others, however, say that entirely new explanations are demanded (Sparks, 2008, Sparks 2010).

³ The conception of the 'Party-state' has Leninist roots, though was first appropriated by the Kuomintang under Chiang Kai-shek's leadership in the 1930s (Barme, 2013). As such, the 'Party-state' cannot be assumed 'communist' in nature. The current Communist Party of China-led 'Party-state' may be seen as merely the second, albeit most important, incarnation.

The framework of 'national development' – a subject which has engaged almost every senior intellectual and politician in China since the 1840s and the country's epochal military defeat to the British (Schell & Delury 2013) – remains an important alternative to the transitological frame. Rather than understanding government actions as an attempt to cling to power in the face of countervailing social and economic pressures, a developmental frame sees the maintenance of control in terms of national rejuvenation. Control is not merely a vehicle for the inherently corrupt maintenance of power but has several, specific functions: one, it supports and coordinates national economic development; two, it acts as a bulwark against potential foreign exploitation; and, three, it ensures social stability during a period of rapid change. The second and third of these factors appear particularly important in the Chinese context where memories of foreign exploitation and episodes of recent, and historical, disorder are burrowed deep into the national psyche (Lovell, 2011).

These two conceptions of China's transition, differ significantly in terms of their explanation of the utility of power, but agree in respect of the fact that the Party-state seeks to hoard power and maintain control. Transition has unleashed powerful social and economic forces; however, control has not, hitherto, been surrendered.

The chief problem, then, is that control *is* manifestly under threat in contemporary China. This is evident in four key fields: firstly, there is demonstrably an increase in social contention, evidenced in the rise of protests and so-called mass incidents; secondly, the Internet – regarded as key in China's economic development – has undermined the Party-state's previous monopoly control of communications and its ability to define political discourse; thirdly, partial economic liberalisation suggests the market may potentially rival the Party for influence, at least in some areas of political and social life; and, lastly, partly as a response to an increasingly complex polity and partly through policy design, there has been a process of institutional fragmentation within the political sphere and regional fragmentation in the economic sphere (Harrison & Ma 2012; Lin, 2008).

China has, of course, never been a monolith, but the increase in bureaucratic complexity, and regional and global economic competition makes it harder than ever

to rule. Some have even argued that the case of Bo Xilai⁴ reveals that corporatism – simply defined as the capture of politics by vested interests – has emerged in China and that the Party has been subject to hijack by patronage networks (Pei 2014).

Within the transitological paradigm, the tempting question posed by this surfeit of threat is: “How long can the Party-state last?” Though tempting, this is the wrong question, not least because it has been asked, unsuccessfully, too many times before, and because there is no way to offer a straightforward, empirically-based answer. A better starter question can be drawn from the developmental frame which assumes that as long as the Party is successfully marshalling growth and maintaining stability, it is likely to stay in control. It is this: **"How is conflict being managed in China and are there signs of negotiation over control?"**

As a guiding question for a PhD project, even this is a little too broad and unwieldy to be manageable. This thesis thus narrows the area of enquiry by searching in one specific sphere: the Chinese media.

Simply put, the Chinese media has been one of the most important vehicles of change in China over the last 30 years and, perhaps more pertinently, a great source of evidence for the nature of that change. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the public media is one of the few sources of information about the machinations of elite politics in China. In its pages is evidence of not only elite decision making, but also elite division and governance strategies.

The media, however, is more than just a window into political decision making around the threats cited above. It is, itself, an *example* of all of these threats: commercialised, fragmented, and increasingly devolved from central power. Nevertheless, it remains a *potential* tool of political power, even if its role as a ‘transmission belt’ of communication between the government and the governed – to borrow Lenin’s famous formulation – may be legitimately questioned.

This project has further narrowed the field by choosing to examine, specifically, the Chinese press. Of the available media sources, the press is the one most actively

⁴ Bo was a member of the CCP Politburo and Party leader of the large and economically important municipality of Chongqing (and Dalian prior to that). He was arrested in somewhat sensational circumstances in 2012 and eventually prosecuted for grand-scale corruption.

engaged with politics, perhaps as a result of its status as the ‘first’ media (Ke, 2010) and one which played a key role in most of the major political campaigns of the People’s Republic of China (PRC)-era⁵. While one should not dismiss radio (the ‘second’ media) and television (the ‘third’), if one is concerned primarily with political communications, the press is the obvious media format to probe.

The question at the beginning of this paragraph thus can be reworked to ask: **“How is conflict represented and reproduced in the pages of the mainstream press? And what might this say about methods of management of social conflict and contention?”**

This begs a further question. Precisely *because* the press is an example of the control-threatening factors discussed above – commercialisation, fragmentation, intra-industry rivalries, and so on – it is, itself, an important site of contention around many of the tensions discussed above. Thus, it is possible to go one step further and ask: **“In reproducing conflict, do different parts of the Chinese newspaper industry reflect pressures of social contention, of the Internet, of commerce, and of fragmented regional and institutional control? And what implications may this have for the role of the press in China?”**

To reiterate, the ambition of this thesis is to “examine and evaluate the role of the Chinese press through the prism of social contention”. We have so far seen why it may be worthwhile examining the Chinese press. Now we turn to the second part of the mission statement.

As has already been explained, this thesis is concerned with conflict and the management of conflict within the Chinese polity. Thus it makes obvious sense to look for direct, explicit discussion of conflict within public media. This is problematic because it must be assumed that reporting around, and discussion of, social conflict is, politically speaking, highly sensitive and therefore scarce. The presence of protest, theory holds, may be construed as evidence of lack of local order or leadership and, thus, damage the careers of the officials deemed responsible. If one makes the reasonable assumption that politics and media in China are heavily intertwined, then

⁵ Among numerous examples, newspaper editorials initiated the Cultural Revolution (Guo, 2010: 43) and fanned the flames of student unrest in the Spring of 1989 (Schell & Delury, 2013: 307).

one may assume that issues of conflict are likely to be treated very circumspectly in the pages of the Chinese press.

However, it is for this very reason that protest reporting – that is, reporting on protest events – was chosen as a subject for study. Though it eliminates the possibility of conducting wide-ranging, quantitative studies – the plausibility of censorship is simply too large to yield valid, generalisable findings – where it is found it offers a window into *political* decision-making as well as the more obvious *editorial* decision-making. Put simply, it is inconceivable that local leaders, and possibly even provincial and national leaders, would not be in some way involved in the reporting of protest events because of their highly sensitive nature.

Thus we have created some circularity. Social conflict is part of the reason why it is important to study changing political approaches – and thus the press – but is also, in itself, a valuable vehicle for studying that change.

Theoretical background

The focus introduced above requires an explanation of two loci of related theory. They are distinct but parallels can be drawn. The first involves the Chinese press; the second, protest in China.

China press theory has two strands. The eldest is drawn primarily from Soviet press theory (Siebert et al, 1973) and may be characterised as the propaganda model of the Chinese media. This posits the media as the aforementioned ‘transmission belt’ between, to put it crudely, an ideologically and professionally enlightened proletarian elite – the Party – and the masses. Regardless of their assumed independence or objectivity, journalists working within a capitalist system are led by the economic superstructure to act as servants of the ruling classes. Communist journalists, therefore, take the converse position by explicitly representing the interests of the Party who, by turns, are making policy in the interests of the working classes (de Burgh, 2003). For this, it is necessary to adhere to an established ‘line on truth’ (ibid), as delineated by the Party. In this effort, and working in co-ordination with teachers and work units, public opinion is ‘correctly’ guided. In 2012, Zhao detected in modern China a “mutation of Soviet press theory” and, even more recently, Schell and Delury

have argued that “the notion that artists and members of the media should be a megaphone for the party and state is one that still has not been officially amended today” (2014: 227). Indeed, under the current Xi presidency and in the theoretical writings in CCP journals such as *Seeking Truth*, there are strong remnants of these ideas.

That Schell and Delury use the word “officially” in the above quote does, however, point to the fact that changes have clearly taken place since Mao had the chance to put his take on Leninist press theory into effect after 1949. These are recognised in more recent China press theory. This recognises the development of a diversified, depoliticized press which caters to an increasingly market-focused and commercially-minded audience. Here, the press is unleashed from strict Party control and is free to pursue market interests, serving investors at the financially literate end of the market, and everyday consumers at the ad-heavy, populist end. While some have seen this as leading the press into conflict with the Party (Lynch, 1999), most modern scholars observe the press working alongside the state and playing a vital role in popularising and expediting broader Party-sanctioned market-based reform (Lee et al, 2006). Moreover, media workers, though expected to adhere to hazily-defined political goals, are given the independence to remake their audiences. As Keane puts it, media workers and journalists have moved from being the “engineers of the soul” to “entrepreneurs of the soul” (2013).

Echoing the Postman-esque debates in Western media theory (Postman, 1986), some have seen China’s modern media – press included – as a tool of distraction, of celebrity tittle-tattle and highly transient stories of individual drama thrown up by the daily churn of the World Wide Web. DeLuca and Peebles have argued that the concept of the ‘public sphere’ should be replaced by that of the ‘public screen’, a communicative environment where constructive exchange is stymied by a screen-based, image-dominated ‘hypermediacy’ (DeLuca and Peebles, 2002: 125)⁶. In such a milieu, critical debate is *possible* but far from *inevitable*. Within this complex landscape, the press may intervene to guide fragmented public debate. The

⁶ See page 81.

interaction of mainstream media and the Internet thus produces a force which forestalls change and diffuses pressure.

These competing press theories have echoes in the theories which swirl around the second major set of issues related to this project: theories of public protest in China. Here there are two predominant strands. One maintains, broadly, that in their overarching and enduring fear of 'chaos', officials seek to restrict and inhibit protest in the pursuit of social harmony and their own career goals. Operating within a strong, authoritarian and highly militarised state, officials retain both the means and the motivation to do this, suppressing at will, permitting when it suits.

The other theory – which has gained ground as China has become a more complex society – describes 'responsive authoritarianism' where the government is content to let protests occur, even when protests may lead to consequences which may be politically embarrassing or otherwise awkward. This is for three reasons: one, protests perform a useful democratic function in their ability to highlight areas of popular discontent and thus improve governance; two, protests have a social psychological function in acting as a kind of 'pressure valve' to prevent the build-up of more ominous social forces; and, three, protests may be state-enhancing in justifying the necessity of a strong government and providing a chance to demonstrate its efficacy. However, this theory acknowledges drawbacks. Permitting protest is a high-risk strategy which requires a precarious policy of channelling, rather than encouraging, popular anger.

Aims and methods

In order to answer the questions sketched out above, this research adopts a case study approach. As already intimated, the specific political contingencies of each of China's 150,000 yearly mass incidents (Sparks, 2012: 62) are such that expecting each of them to have some testament recorded in the news media, even at the local level, is not realistic. This then rules out the possibility of running news data from large-scale quantitative filters. Rather, this research has selected three specific and large-scale events from which signposts, rather than firm conclusions, may be drawn.

Each of the three incidents discussed in this thesis was, of course, unique. However, each incident was selected because it was emblematic – though not necessarily *representative* – of one of modern China's most important forms of social contention. No exhaustive typology of protest in China has yet been presented. This is for a reason; there are as many potential sources of contention as there are people. However, one can certainly discern commonalities in the sources of dispute from which one can begin to sketch a patchwork of protest genres. Land disputes; environmental contention; labour strikes; minority disputes; 'anger-venting' incidents; free speech protests; police brutality; nationalist protest; student protests. The distinctions are necessarily crude, issues frequently overlap, and the thread of corruption runs through nearly all of them. However, the first three protest types on this list are both the most common, and touch on issues core to the process of China's modern economic transformation, and it is economic issues which are likely to form the most meaningful and enduring source of tension. Thus, emblematic protests around land, the environment and labour were selected for study.

The research deliberately shuns those protest forms which, arguably, get the greatest attention in Western news media – ethnically or religiously-based protest in the likes of Xinjiang and Tibet, and anti-foreigner protests which have intermittently occurred throughout the last century, most recently against Japan over the issue of the Diaoyu, or Senkaku, islands. It does so because much has already been written about them and also because they appear to the author to be peripheral to the daily ebbs and flows of mainstream – read, ethnic Han – society. Issues around land, labour and environmental degradation appear to the author to be more central to current development of Chinese society. Indeed, it is unimaginable that there are any cities, towns or even villages in China where conflict does not brew on a daily basis within these spheres.

In each protest event, the research examines in detail the coverage across a variety of news sources. The research has selected a number of publications which, again, appear to be as representative as possible of the major *kinds* of modern publication which comprise the modern Chinese newspaper market, principally the **business**

press, the **party** press and the **commercial** press. In addition, the research is particularly keen to look at both **local** and **national** coverage.

In terms of precisely *what* kind of data is sought within these publications, the research seeks to examine, broadly, the nature of the discourse around these events, looking specifically at the language employed by the various newspapers examined.

In 2013, writing in the *Red Flag Manuscript* (Hongqi Wengao)⁷, Ren Xianliang, a regional propaganda minister, argued that a marked division had opened up between ‘traditional public opinion’ – read mainstream newspapers, journals and broadcasters – and public opinion carried on ‘internet-based emerging media’, a term which may extend to telecom platforms such as SMS. The problem was damaging to effective Party governance, he argued. The solution he proposed was for the Party to be bolder in asserting control of the unruly internet sphere (Bandurski, 2013).

Ren Xianliang certainly was not the first to note a ‘dual discourse’ in Chinese communications (He 2008, Link 2012), cleaved between official and non-official.

Neither was his top-down solution to the problem the only possible answer.

Previously proposals had argued for a more nuanced approach which may allow the ‘traditional’ to close the gap in language, discourse and agenda with the ‘emerging’ (Qian & Bandurski, 2011). Thus one of the specific aspects probed in this study is the nature of language and discourse in the mainstream media. There can be no assumption of the mainstream press somehow breaking free of ‘traditional public opinion’ and competing with the ‘internet-based emerging media’. However, the research is interested in the extent to which change may be observed in an attempt to reduce to gap that has been cited. It probes whether the historic tendency of protestors to “usurp, appropriate and adapt official modes of communication and ceremonial forms” (Wasserstrom, 1991: 325-326) may work in reverse. In an Internet-dominated communications environment characterised by multiple sites of power and public accessibility, would there be evidence of official communications appropriating and adapting online modes and forms in order to close the discourse gap?

⁷ The *Red Flag Manuscript* is a subordinate publication of *Seeking Truth* (qiushi) magazine, a bi-monthly published by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCP) focused on political theory and read by elite Party members. See english.qstheory.cn/aboutqs.htm

Of course, Ren's initial conception of the integrity and homogeneity of the 'official' public sphere looks odd when compared with the changes that have occurred *within* the media industry since 1978. These changes can be summed up in two words: commercialisation and fragmentation (Lee, 2000; Zhao, 1998).

The commercialisation of the Chinese press has its roots in the 1990s. Newspapers, like much of China's publishing industry, underwent something approaching a financial revolution at that time, with the Party absenting itself from its historic role as financial guarantor. Instead, newspapers became tasked with finding their own funds and were unleashed to dive into the commercial world (Zhao, 2008; Hockx, 2012). The outcome was a press system in which commercial evening and morning newspapers flourished; in which news organisations branched out into non-media sectors such as hospitality and property; in which dubious news practices such as 'news extortion' and 'fake news' became endemic; and in which advertising flourished. A contemporary reader of, say, the *Southern Daily*, a party publication linked with the provincial-level government in Guangdong, will routinely find the austere 'Party' paper disguised beneath an outer, single page 'wrap', which carries advertising and series of 'puffs' pointing to weather reports, crime stories and fashion features. Online, visitors to news sites can find lurid advertisements for 'dating services' beside highly formal Xinhua news copy (Bandurski, 2014).

Alongside, and often intertwined, with the general trend towards commercialisation is the fragmentation of the press into what Zhao (2008) identifies as 'Party', 'commercial' and 'elite' publications. Further complication comes from the increasing complexity of the propaganda system, with the work of national agencies such as the State Council Information Office (SCIO) and its subordinate department, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC)⁸, as well as the State Administration of Press, Publications, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT)⁹ and its subordinate

⁸ This is the most recent (English) name of the department created in 2011 as the State Internet Information Office (SIIO), responsible specifically for monitoring web content.

⁹ SAPPRFT is a recent innovation, formed in 2013 from the merger of two huge regulatory bodies, the General Administration of Press and Publications (GAPP) and the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). The merger offers clear evidence that there is a keen awareness in Beijing of the unwieldy nature of media regulation. In light of consolidation in other areas, the formation of SAPPRFT was perhaps an attempt to begin the process of remedying regulatory fragmentation (Li, 2013a).

department, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), each dovetailing with regional propaganda bodies. All of this represents a fragmentation of communicatory power in increasingly complex polity. Beyond simple language and discourse, the research probes whether this might be reflected in the manner in which social contention was reported within the various different section of the mainstream press, at different tiers of the media hierarchy, and hence, looks to compare, in forensic detail, differences between protest-related output in these publications.

Main Findings

This thesis examines in detail how three large street protests were covered by China's mainstream China press. Firstly, and most broadly, it shows that, contrary to what might be deduced from both academic literature and Anglophone news, reporting around three high profile recent episodes of mass social contention was not absent from the mainstream media in China. There was considerable reporting and this reporting was often self-congratulatory in its tone. Media texts acknowledge, draw attention to and celebrate the openness and transparency that their very existence purportedly demonstrates. Clearly, 'openness' is something which wants to be communicated, even if that openness is ultimately lacking. Indeed, any reader relying *only* on contemporary mainstream coverage would have come away with little sense of the magnitude and significance of the actions, but that is not to diminish the significance of these protest events appearing on the state-sanctioned 'public screen', something barely recognised in the academic literature around protest in China.

There are obvious distinctions between the three protests. In Xiamen's anti-PX (paraxylene¹⁰) protest in 2007, reporting was halting and largely handled locally. In Chongqing's taxi strike in 2008 there was a clear tension between relatively conservative local reporting and strikingly dynamic national reporting. In the land protest in Wukan in 2011, the protest was chiefly covered inside the province and the most obvious tension between the Party press of Guangzhou, the provincial capital, and Shanwei, the local county seat.

¹⁰ A benzene-derived hydrocarbon used in the manufacturing of certain plastics and polyesters.

In defining conservative and dynamic, we may draw attention to key facets of what constitutes 'normal' protest reporting in the mainstream Chinese press. Conservative reporting may be characterised as thus: report only after the protest has finished; emphasise disorder; stress social and economic damage caused; demonise protestors as extreme; and laud the efficacy and dynamism of Party officials.

Much of this chimes with the characteristics of China's modern propaganda techniques detailed by Brady (2010) but these have not before been examined in specific relation to protest events. Moreover, one of Brady's chief contentions – that the media do not tackle problems which have no obvious solution – appears to be contradicted. The first two protests, in Xiamen and Chongqing, involved highly complex, systemic issues where a simple scapegoat was not immediately apparent.

Dynamic protest reporting may, conversely, be characterised as: releasing contemporaneous reports; acknowledging the legitimacy of protestor demands; humanising the protestors; and drawing specific attention to areas of compromise.

A second, tentative finding, is that 2008 appeared to mark an anomaly in protest reporting. There is more in common with the treatment of the 2007 and 2011 protests than there is evidence of linear change from 2007 to 2011. This project was not designed with a prominent longitudinal element. It is a cross-sectional study in terms of the fact that all case studies are taken from the politically coherent Hu-Wen era, and are delineated by protest *type* rather than any *temporal* distinction. However, the three events do span one, somewhat liminal, threshold. In 2008, the then-president Hu Jintao detailed a move away from 'public opinion guidance' towards 'public opinion channelling' (Qian & Bandurski, 2011). In Xiamen's PX protest in 2007, reporting was halting and largely handled locally. However, reporting around the 2008 taxi strike seemed to break free of many of the binding tenets of reporting protest in China, detailed above, particularly at the national level. By the time of the Wukan protests in 2011, however, 'conservative' protest reporting was again in the ascendancy, albeit in a manner which dwelled on the positive aspects of the protest rather more than the reporting in Xiamen did. In short, this study records no major change in the handling of protest between 2007 and 2011, despite the onset of a new media policy and, notably, the advent of the microblog. There are hints that media

workers and propaganda officials are wriggling within their shackles, but the innovation that is hinted at in 2008 is not taken up again in 2011.

The third main finding concerns language and discourse. There is no strong evidence of the 'unofficial' making incursions into press discourse. However, the study is able to corroborate the nature of 'official' discourse, as pertaining to events of social contention. These included the tendency to claim conspiracy and deviance amongst protestors (Tanner, 2004); numeration and sloganeering (Barme, 2012); the prevalence of militaristic language (Link, 2013a; Barme, 2012) and, most generally, the presence of a strong moral evaluative dimension to the language (Link, 2013a; Barme, 2012; Zhao, 2008). This thesis is in agreement with Barme's claim that the discourse of social contention in China represents a "transmogrification rather than a collapse [of the ruling ideology]" and absorbs both leftist and neo-liberal ideas (2012: 10). This was most evident in national level commentary. The 'masses' were discursively, and repeatedly, roused from their fitful Maoist sleep and were frequently aligned with a developmental discourse of competing 'interest claims'.

This thesis' main finding is related to variations within the Chinese press and what these might say about the nature of media in China. In short, the press was not cleaved between commercial and party, as certain aspects of China press theory might have predicted, but rather variation was exposed between different parts of the Party, representing different geographical regions.

Howell (2006) argues that China scholars should be wary of conceptualising the state as a homogenous actor. Sociological studies point to the importance of informal power networks in China politics (Fei, 1992) and these intersect with more recent notions of corporatism in the Chinese context (Sparks, 2010). A study of press coverage indeed reveals differences in the output of journalists and editors according to precisely which political actors are supervising their work. This remains true even when those journalists and editors are faced with obviously sensitive material.

Conceptualising both the Party-state and the Chinese press as increasingly fragmented represents the corrective to the tendency among observers of Chinese politics and media to observe intensely strategic thinking in every action. This thesis does make the assumption that the media remains a tool of government and

invariably performs in the interests of power. However, the fragmentation of that power makes it hard to envisage every action, or every printed word, working to service a single, strategic purpose. This fragmentation may well explain why media behave differently and why Chinese officials often regard journalists as antagonistic and adversarial. Such a position is not an expression of media or journalistic power, but an expression of hierarchical political power. Journalists working for senior political units may well be instrumentalised by those units to put pressure on junior officials, but this works within the political hierarchy rather than outside it.¹¹

Revisions

This research has undergone extensive revisions in its four-year duration. This section summarise these changes. A more complete narrative is detailed in Chapter 5.

This project began with what may be termed “techno-utopian” (Morozov, 2011) zeal. One-directional change was assumed to be taking place in China, driven by technological developments. Citizens shut out of public communication were asserting bottom-up pressure through online platforms, placing strain on the one-party state. The theoretical frame conceived of a *retreating* Party and an *advancing* demos, with mainstream Chinese media playing a vital role in mediating this confrontation.

Initially, the project tested this hypothesis by seeking interviews with media workers and examining contemporary online discourse. It gradually became clear that the author grossly underestimated the dynamism of online censorship practices and overestimated his own ability to capture and process real-time data. It became similarly clear that the project misconceived the Chinese state as monolithic and misrepresented the politicized pronouncements of *some* so-called Netizens as representative of *all* online discourse and Chinese society in general.

¹¹ This function of media does not, of course, only apply to neo-authoritarian systems such as that which operates in China. In her biography of the US President Theodore Roosevelt, Goodwin articulates how journalists were instrumentalized by elite power within a democratic political system in order to generate ‘public opinion’ which may then be used to overcome the problems caused by a system which had become fragmented and sclerotic (Goodwin, 2013). In short, oppositional journalism may be immensely helpful to elite interests.

The search for a solution was a complex and difficult process, explained in more detail in Chapter 5, but finally turned towards a focus on more static, mainstream media texts and a political frame which considered how the Party-state worked *through* a commercialised media to meet the challenges of a changed communications landscape. The decision to settle on *protest* as the specific focus had inductive roots. The high-speed train crash near Wenzhou in 2011 prompted online outrage and surprisingly robust media commentary, and alerted the author to the fact that protest was a feature within the Chinese press. This appeared a useful pivot on which to hang an investigation of press performance in an age where traditional propaganda methods and censorship patterns had manifestly changed.

The research process has been one of progressive narrowing and simplification. The changes may be summarised in four ways: firstly, the project has shifted in its temporal focus from *contemporary* events to *historic* (albeit recent) subjects; secondly, it has shifted in its theoretical focus from a *sociological* inquiry into journalistic practice to a *political* inquiry into press function; thirdly, it has shifted in terms of its object of study, from a concern with *online contention* and towards a focus on *press performance*; and finally, it has moved away from an effort to collect *representative, quantitative data* to a more *qualitative* and necessarily subjective approach.

Approach

This project adopts a simple approach to study of mass produced media texts for clues about the instrumentalisation of the media by political power. Shunning normative conceptualisations of Anglophone journalism, the thesis makes the assumption that the information which was ultimately released into the public sphere served the interests of the informant in some capacity, and it is this overlapping network of contending interest claims from which this research draws its findings. The approach builds on Link's notion of what he calls 'the language game':

...[W]here the standard is not "Is it true or not?" but "Does it serve the speaker's interests or not?" the counterpart of a "lie" is not possible. The person who hears a statement can be 100 percent sure that "this speaker believes that this statement serves his or her interests." It might

not be easy to figure out exactly what the specific interest is, but one can be sure that the speaker is aiming at it. It also can happen that a speaker miscalculates in the choice of words which will actually serve his or her interests. But that, too, does not change the principle that the speaker believes that the words will be expedient” (2010: 281)

The case study approach used precludes generalizable conclusions and there will be no attempt to offer a definite closing statement. Rather each event throws up implications – sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory – for the theoretical understandings and conceptualisations of the Chinese media.

The approach displayed here is one of narrowing and focus in search of meaning. The media landscape in China is huge, confusing, contradictory and dynamic. Research thus requires an intense focus and a systematic approach so that the chaos is confined and extraneous noise eliminated. When one attempts to capture a huge field – in the way the eyes and brain do every time they apprehend the world – reductions and assumptions become a necessary mechanism for effective analysis. By adopting a case study approach and with the application of methods of textual analysis, I am hoping to reduce the blind spots and the reductions. Such an approach means that is difficult to say something with any degree of certitude about a large field of study. However, I can offer certainty – albeit with caveats – within certain narrow fields of inquiry, which help point the way to further potential research avenues.

This is an approach which, reluctantly – but consciously, ignores many of the scholarly media paradigms which have emerged over recent decades. It neglects reception studies, has little to say about issues such as the *use* of media and takes only a passing interest in issues of convergence and the development of networked information flows. Rather, the study operates within a tradition of political communications, employing a Kremlinology-inspired methodology. Pre-1978, Kremlinology (Cohen, 1985: 29-30) offered one of the few ways in Chinese politics. Nowadays, there is far greater openness and transparency in most fields, though not necessarily in the one this work is most interested in. The opacity of Chinese politics

remains strong and there are few better ways of deciphering strategies of political communications than by studying the texts that are 'officially' produced.

This work has been inspired, broadly, by the sociological endeavour of 'problematizing the ostensibly simple' and examining data sources which have been dismissed or otherwise overlooked on account of their seemingly easy explicability. The Chinese press is something too often dismissed as being a modern irrelevance; it is dull, it is state-controlled, and thus it is readily dismissible. The majority of scholars have rather turned their gaze towards the Internet and pondered issues such as the development of civil society, the public sphere and state-society relations. The research is interested in each of these things, but for all the detailed, nuanced, scholarly work done on issues such as civil society, governance strategies, demographics and economics, the mainstream media, and newspapers in particular, are too often assumed to be simple, one-dimensional and irrelevant.

Through the work of scholars such as Lee (2000), de Burgh (2003), Pan (2005), Zhao (2008) and Yu (2009b), it is evident that there is increasing transparency in terms of journalistic practice. Not only are newsrooms increasingly accessible to scholars, journalists are increasingly making the transfer between editorial work and scholarly endeavours, bringing with them new insights. This trend is best typified by the work of Hong Kong University's *China Media Project*, which has provided a platform for several notable journalists to make this transition. Collectively, this work has entailed a probing of self-conceptions and working practices, very often – though not always – with an evident desire on the part of the researcher to resurrect the spirit of pioneering journalists such as Wang Tao and discover evidence of an adversarial, polemical, investigative, and perhaps even democratising, instinct. Such a focus on the ebb and flow of control supposes China's journalist class is playing an eternal game of 'edge-ball', probing and extending, where possible, the boundaries of the permissible. The reality is unclear, but the likelihood is that, while some do engage in such risky and provocative behaviour, the majority are content – though not necessarily happy – to perform their journalistic duties within the boundaries set out, as best they can be discerned. Rather than study working practices and self-conceptions, then, this study is focused on these boundaries – *what* is permitted to

be said, in *what* context, and expressed in *what* way – and what they might say about Chinese politics, and social management techniques, rather than what it says about journalists themselves who are, as Sparks (2012) and others have pointed out, as multifarious as the society they purport to record.

Value of research

This thesis is one of only a handful of studies which has seen fit to look to mainstream coverage as a source of data and many of its claims to value are staked on this very straightforward basis. It will be the first to provide an account of the patterns of reporting protest around three events, two of which have been widely written about but whose authors have shown little interest in mainland media coverage. It will specifically examine the nature, scope and extent of the discourses of protest and connect with the literatures on media development, and on politics and protest in China.

Quite simply, this is an area which has been overlooked, presumably on account of its assumed negligible importance. Lee and Chan's study conducted extensive content analysis of a protest within Chinese newsprint (2011) but this was in the very different media context of Hong Kong. Lee (2010) and Tong (2008) have both examined coverage of protest events in mainland China, but these studies were brief and used the mediation of protest to look specifically at questions of, respectively, democratisation and journalistic practice. As has been made clear, this study is interested in political communications, but with an approach which is shorn of the burdens of democratic wishful thinking and obsession with assumptions about guerrilla journalists upsetting the apple cart.

Structure of the thesis

The structure of this thesis has changed considerably over the period of writing up. Initially, it was thought best to provide distinct chapters detailing some of the main strands of analysis – separate sections of 'protest discourse', on 'differences between the Party and commercial press' and the 'narrative' of press reporting. In the end, it was felt to offer a more straightforward structure with separate chapters providing

detailed accounts of each of the case study events, with the conclusion knitting the analysis together.

Thus, this final thesis is composed of eight chapters. This introduction has summarised the main problem and provided a justification of the relevance of the project. Chapters 2 and 3 combine to form an extensive literature review and provide an account of scholarship in the two broad fields which impinge of the core subject of this thesis, the **Chinese press** and **Chinese protest**, which includes a large and important sub-section on a field where social contention is most readily discernible, the **Chinese Internet**. Chapter 4 sets out the main theoretical arguments around **transitology, press theory** as it pertains to authoritarian regimes, as well as the vital importance of **language** in Chinese political communications. Chapter 5 sets out the methodology of this project. Chapters 6 to 8, as explained, focus on each of the three studied protest events in turn, working in chronological order from the 2007 Xiamen PX protest to the 2012 Wukan protest. Finally, chapter 9 offers a final analysis of the reporting around these three protest events and summarises the main findings.

Chapter 2: The Chinese Press in Context

Introduction

The Chinese press has gone through several iterations during a history which spans nearly a thousand years. Beginning during the dynastic period as an elite tool of imperial communication, China's newspaper industry rapidly expanded under colonial tutelage in the 19th century. After a relatively freewheeling period in the 1930s, the communist press took on a consistently Leninist visage for most of the Mao years, acting as an adjunct of the State and a tool of mass mobilisation and propaganda. Since the reform and opening up (*gaige kaifang*) period began in 1980, the Chinese press has experienced great vicissitudes, liberalising, commercialising and diversifying to various extents at different times. Currently, though journalists and editors are demonstrably conscious of political priorities, China's newspapers appear more concerned than ever with the needs and desires of their consumers, resulting in a curiously hybrid system which might crudely be described as a heavily-regulated commercial space, or a semi-free press.

The Chinese Press in Historical Context

The Early Press

Of the dizzying number of inventions attributed to China in Needham's pioneering work, *Science and Civilisation in China* (1978) none have been as transformative for human development as printing. The manifold political, social and economic changes wrought by Johannes Guttenberg's popularisation of the printing press in the 15th century could not have occurred were it not for the techniques and technologies he borrowed, consciously or not, from early Chinese innovation. China's earliest known woodblock printed newspaper, the *Kaiyuan Za Bao*, originated in the first half of the 8th century under Tang emperor Xuanzong (Chang, 1989: 4) and an early incarnation of Guttenberg's moveable type printing press was developed in the 11th century by craftsman Bi Sheng (Needham, 1978)¹².

¹² Bi Sheng's movable type press was necessarily less flexible than Guttenberg's on account of the differences between Chinese and German script.

The feting of Guttenberg in historiography inevitably leads to charges of Eurocentricism, though one need not be so in elevating printing's importance. Printing has played a vital role in forging China's historically-constituted and highly literate modern culture. The dissemination of information through printed text both sustained imperial rule in China for more than a millennium¹³ and, more widely, facilitated the spread of Buddhism across China and East Asia¹⁴.

By contrast, modern journalism may be reasonably described as a Western import. Journalism remained largely undeveloped in China until the advent of 19th century colonialism. The changes wrought by European interlopers were twofold: missionaries brought with them the organisational, technical and commercial competencies associated with regularized publishing. The first Chinese-language monthly was published by a British missionary, William Milne, as early as 1815 (Scotten & Hatchen, 2012: 20)¹⁵. Businessmen took over the mantle in the second half of the 19th century, particularly in the port cities¹⁶. The first daily newspaper in China, launched in Guangzhou in 1854, was explicitly commercial and the half-century that followed the close of the First Opium War saw the publication of more than 300 periodicals (ibid).

The second inspiration that colonialism provided was as an object of scrutiny, deliberation and discussion in itself. The fact that a range of European powers were able to win ostensibly straightforward military victories and carve out extraterritorial concessions prompted Chinese intellectuals to organise opinion in the form of publishing and pamphleteering. Colonialism itself was not necessarily the *target* of such published commentary. Rather, the subjects of scorn were the formal institutions of Chinese society which had been found impotent against foreign incursions. China's "first modern journalist" (Schell & Delury, 2013: 46), Wang Tao,

¹³ Hand-written court gazettes, or *dibao*, are thought to have existed from as early as the Han dynasty (202 BC to 221 AD). It was under the Tang that these became printed editions (Chang, 1989: 5).

¹⁴ The world's oldest surviving printed text, the 9th century Diamond Sutra, is a Buddhist document found in grottoes near Dunhuang, a remote oasis town at China's western desert frontier. It is currently (2014) held by the British Library.

¹⁵ Merrill claims that the first modern Chinese newspaper was actually the Chinese-language *Eastern Western Monthly Magazine*, founded in Guangzhou (Canton) in 1833 (quoted in Chang 1989: 7). There is, however, agreement over the explicitly religious focus of these early publications.

¹⁶ As well as ceding the island of Hong Kong to the British, the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing guaranteed commercial access to five treaty ports for the British. These port cities were Shanghai, Xiamen, Guangzhou, Fuzhou and Ningbo.

epitomises both influences, beginning as a translator in a missionary school, moving to the United Kingdom and returning to establish a daily newspaper in Hong Kong – the *Xunhuan Ribao* (Circulation Daily) – which regularly featured polemical pieces on China's perceived weakness.

Though potential reform had been discussed ever since China's comprehensive defeat in the First Opium War¹⁷ (Fenby, 2009; Lovell, 2011; Schell & Delury, 2013) it was the Chinese loss in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 that proved the most important grist to the mill of political debate. Indeed, resistance to the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ended the war, had coalesced into something approaching a movement by 1898 which called for radical change. The movement's leading intellectual lights were Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, one-time civil servants who collaborated to publish newspapers which unambiguously advocated sweeping constitutional reform as a response to the perceived 'national crisis'. Though Kang and Liang were forced from their official positions and saw their publications suppressed (Levenson, 1967: 21-22), a trend had been established which would be repeated over the next generation by luminaries such as (Nationalist leader) Sun Yat-sen, (Chinese Communist Party founder) Chen Duxiu and Mao Zedong, who each spent time running radical periodicals calling for revolutionary change.

Thus China's press emerged from a hybrid and somewhat contradictory tradition, at once a vehicle for capitalist exchange and for polemical politics. This cannot be described as unique. Indeed, there are obvious parallels with the kind of pamphleteering undertaken by the likes of John Milton in 17th century England. Like China two centuries later, Britain was then on the cusp of radical constitutional change, the franchise was extremely limited in scope and the audience for such writings was mainly traders and merchants. In this respect, *fin de siècle* China could be said to be undergoing a process experienced in parts of western Europe some two centuries earlier. What was different was what it ultimately produced.

¹⁷ Generally regarded as being from 1839 to 1842.

The Republican and Early Communist Press

The precise *effect* of this activist press in the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and the so-called New Culture Movement which followed is impossible to quantify. That there was an effect is equally impossible to deny. The ferment of ideas during this period of enormous political and social flux was palpable. By 1919, the transition to a new constitutional arrangement was stalled and beset with factionalism. From Russia came news that the Bolsheviks had captured and consolidated power; the Treaty of Versailles proved, to many, the betrayal of exploitative Western powers, and all the while the significant Chinese diaspora was absorbing and transmuting ideas of syndicalism, Marxism and other radical philosophies into the Chinese context. The burning question that had been asked ever since 1842 – what was needed to rejuvenate an ailing nation – continued to be asked in publications and pamphlets across the land.

The 1919-1949 period has been described as the ‘golden era’ of Chinese media (de Burgh, 2003). Hundreds of people from different backgrounds and from different political persuasions set up periodicals, magazines and newspapers. Though there were almost constant attempts to control public discourse, notably by the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party in the 1920s and 1930s, the repression was sporadic and inconsistent. Indeed, lacking the strict ideological rigour of their communist successors, the KMT eventually publish regulations for the protection of press freedom. “Indeed, in spite of all the restrictions imposed (or half imposed) by Nanjing [in the 1930s], China possibly enjoyed more intellectual freedom than ever before or since” (Gray, 1990, quoted in De Burgh, 2003: 102). By 1947 there were 1,781 registered newspapers across the country, the majority of which were independent of political control or explicit political alignment.

It was in this vibrant intellectual milieu that the Chinese Communist Party was founded in Shanghai in 1921¹⁸, though its respect for the idea of unfettered exchange of information and ideas was limited. The party adhered to a Marxist view of the press (see next chapter) – the ‘propaganda model’ – which had already begun to be

¹⁸ The CCP was founded in a meeting house within the so-called French Concession, one of Shanghai’s colonially-administered districts.

implemented and developed by the Russian Bolsheviks. The core of this belief posited that journalists – regardless of their personal belief or behaviour – were led by the economic superstructure to act as representatives and advocates of the ruling classes. Communist journalists, therefore, must occupy the converse position whereby they represented the interests of the working classes, and work to persuade the masses of their ‘line on truth’. In this task, “[t]he main consideration was not whether statements be true or false but the consequences they might have and their ‘class nature’” (de Burgh, 2003).

Both of the CCP’s two great 20th century leaders had personal experience of writing, editing and publishing newspapers. During the CCP’s alliance with the KMT in the mid-1920s, Mao Zedong worked as chief editor of the KMT’s central organ, *Political Weekly* (Chang, 1989: 16), while Deng Xiaoping once served as the chief editor at *Red Star*, the official organ of the Chinese Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army (Xie, 2011: 294). The lessons of these experiences bore fruit in the communist bases of Jiangxi in the early 1930s and, later, in the camps and cave dwellings of Yan’an where the Party rehabilitated itself after the almost-fatal ravages of the Long March. It was here, in the large but isolated and bounded community, that early communist leaders were able to put their theories of information dissemination into practice. These were defined by Mao’s speeches through the middle of 1942, later collated and dubbed ‘Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature’, in which he defined all cultural works, media included, as belonging to the ideological sphere, and that all must take the “correct stand” in the service of the “proletariat and the masses” (Mao, 1960). Critical to Mao’s view was the notion, widely held at the time, that the media had transcendental powers which could change – or ‘correct’ – an individual’s thinking (Schell & Delury, 2013; Chilton et al, 2012: 10).

The Propaganda Model of the Chinese Press

The first few months in the life of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) were relatively relaxed as the CCP set about building the infrastructure of statehood. Several independent publications in Shanghai – home to the most vibrant newspaper industry pre-1949 – attempted to continue business, unbelieving that their commercial and technical expertise would be so readily dismissed by the incoming regime (Brady,

2010). By 1951, however, the totalitarian ideological priorities of the incoming regime were clear. 'New' China would involve wholesale re-education of the population. An era of "relentless political campaigns aimed at the thought reform of the Chinese people in all aspects of life" (ibid: 37) was underway.

Newspapers played a vital role in signalling, driving and ending the mass campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s. The Anti-Three and Anti-Five campaigns, the Hundred Flowers campaign, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were all signalled and triggered from newspaper editorials (Scotten & Hachten, 2010: 43). During the Hundred Flowers campaign, newspapers were the primary vehicle in which dissenting views were aired, though correspondents and officials who had heeded Mao's encouragement to speak out were later purged or punished. In day-to-day propaganda work, newspapers were a vital tool in carrying out re-education work. Study sessions in factories and offices incorporated clippings from official publications (ibid). In this sense, journalists, or 'news workers' (*xinwen gongzuo zhe*) (Xu, 2000: 55), were aware of their responsibilities in nation-building. PRC media focused to an overwhelming degree on positive developments, unity and refrained from contrasting views on a topic (Wasserstrom, 2010: 122-3). In a posthumously published work, long-time Chinese president¹⁹ Liu Shaoqi, (1984: 30) identified four principles of mass persuasion that were at work in the Chinese press during this era: insulation (from competing ideas); emotional arousal; simplification; and politicisation.

The problems associated with an uncritical press were made particularly stark after the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961). Journalists were among the few people within China during these years who were able to travel freely and observe first-hand the calamitous effects of the policy of mass collectivisation and large-scale exportation of the grain stock. The grim realities of the resultant famine and failing industrial output were not, however, reported openly by such journalists. Though some produced

¹⁹ As 'president' Liu was head of state, though his de-facto position during his time at the ostensible peak of Chinese political life was still subordinate to that of Mao. Mao occupied the chairmanship of the CCP throughout his 27-year rule of the People's Republic of China and, as such, remained firmly at the helm of China's immense and complex political bureaucracy. Liu can claim to have commanded arguably greater power than Mao in the year which followed Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward (1957-1961), but Mao reasserted his supremacy shortly thereafter during the Cultural Revolution (Fenby, 2009; Shell & Delury, 2013).

private *neican* reports for circulation among the central leaders, many chose to parrot the ‘truth’ that had been decided by central government, regardless of the situation on the ground. Accordingly, journalists came to be seen by some in the political elite as part of the reason why a ruinous policy was not reversed earlier.

The Great Leap Forward drew attention to one of the most enduring characteristics of the Chinese press, that being its role as political battleground at times of national debate. Factional disputes were exposed in terms of often-subtle, occasionally-stark, differences in the tone and content of editorials in differing publications. Where once there had been a blank slate on which China’s supreme leader, Mao Zedong, could project absolutely his own personal philosophy, there was ambiguity and contention. This was to change radically from 1966 onwards during Mao’s infamous experiment in social engineering and decade-long power play, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*wuchan jieji wenhua da geming*) between 1966 and 1976.

The bare political power play which underpinned the Cultural Revolution was triggered from an article, planted by Mao, in two newspapers in Shanghai, the *Wenhui Bao* and the *Liberation Daily* (*Jiefang Ribao*) (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006: 18). The resulting convulsion engulfed the entire nation, precipitating an unceasing stream of fevered campaigns, crack-downs and organised demonstrations which elevated Mao’s personal status and denigrating, at intervals, almost every other source of potential authority.

The ‘permanent revolution’ of the period engendered two kinds of responses: an initial feeling of “liberation, freedom of expression and freedom of thought” (Brady, 2010: 39), felt by many, followed by a creeping fear of speaking out, an attitude which characterises the response of news workers at all levels. Just as ordinary citizens desperately attempted to adhere to the perceived ‘Party-line’ in public behaviours and pronouncements, editors and journalists abandoned all pretence at independence. Most newspapers ceased publication altogether, with only the 43 party organ newspapers surviving. These, in turn, rarely produced more than six pages per day, and did nothing more controversial than directly ape the output of centrally-controlled media to the point of using identical layouts and typefaces

(Scotton & Hachten, 2010: 21). In the words of former Party newspaper editor Qian Gang, media in this era were “merely tools of despotism” (2014).

The Press During Reform and Opening Up

The post-1978 period in the life of the Chinese press has attracted niche scholarly debate. The process that was taking place throughout the 1980s is described by Pan as “breaking the confinement of the Party-press system based on the propaganda model” (2010, 520), characterised by political liberalisation. This was followed by a post-1989 settlement for the Chinese press which is summed up by two words: *marketization* and *de-politicisation*.

Liberalisation in the 1980s

The Cultural Revolution proved a profound lesson to China’s leadership in the immediate aftermath of the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress²⁰ not least in the media field. The response was a conscious rejection of the idea of mass movements and thought reform – two of the underlying principles of media development up until this point – and a retreat from invasive propaganda work (Brady, 2010: 39). Hu Yaobang, one of the most liberal of China’s leaders and the man whose death sparked the protests of 1989, was appointed, for a short time, as Director of the Central Propaganda Department and, for a lengthier period, senior leader in charge of ideological work. The main ideological guidelines of Zhao Ziyang, CCP General Secretary through most of the 1980s, were “to give signals that he generally tolerated debate and criticism (both inner-Party and within society)” (Brady, 2010: 41). Even when Fang Lizhi, an academic who had called explicitly for democratic reform, was thrown out of the Party, Zhao defended his right to articulate his views (Schell & Delury, 2013: 307).

This broad ideological shift went in lockstep with the process of radical market-based reform. In 1979 the press, for the first time, was given permission to accept advertising (Akhavan-Majid, 2005: 557). The development of newspaper advertising, like so much in the early period of reform, was a tentative and ambiguous process

²⁰ This is the Party meeting, held in December 1978, when Deng Xiaoping is generally regarded as establishing his pre-eminence within the political hierarchy and, thus, opening the way to radical market-based reform.

(Stockmann, 2013) but the trend became firmly established within the decade. Partly because of new advertising opportunities, the 1980s saw an “explosion of lifestyle news-oriented afternoon tabloids” (Zhao, 2008: 77) which, as profit-making vehicles, appeared to completely reorient the entire concept of ‘news’ in the People’s Republic of China. It may not have been a coincidence that the greatest experimentation took place in Guangdong where media outlets were both influenced by, and – to a limited extent – competing with unfettered media outlets on the other side of the Hong Kong border, and imbued with an entrepreneurial energy influenced by the wider economic reforms which were being pioneered there (Cao, 1999).

More widely, the 1980s also saw the establishment of journalistic laws, as well as ‘unofficial’ publications which were, for a time, freed from pre-publication Party oversight altogether (Wright, 1990: 121). For the first time, newspapers began to routinely report negative stories of accidents and touched on difficult social issues without immediate fear of punishment. Even national media outlets responded. The *People’s Daily* called for more critical and investigative reporting (Chang, 1989: 48) and state broadcaster, CCTV, made programmes such as *River Elegy (He Shang)* which presented a revisionist explanation of China’s fall from geopolitical pre-eminence, relegating the importance of colonial subjugation and echoing earlier calls for China to embrace overseas ideas, technologies and philosophies²¹. Again, Guangdong media appear as pivotal here, with some southern newspapers taking an explicitly adversarial stance, calling on Deng Xiaoping to retire and, in rare cases, appealing for the CCP to relinquish power (Chang, 1989).

The Market and the Party, Post 1989

Analysis of the model of the Chinese press appears to hinge around the student protests of 1989. The Party’s own official assessment of the student protests of that year blamed media liberalisation and neglect of ideological work which had fostered overly-sympathetic attitudes to perceived ‘western’ values and ideas, especially among the younger generation. Politics had, to some extent, consciously *withdrawn* from the media sphere during parts of the 1980s. Post 1989 there was a subtle, but

²¹ These were most famously articulated by prominent post-revolution reformer and founding member of the CCP, Chen Duxiu, who, in 1918, called for China to welcome two Western guests, “Mr Science and Mr Democracy”, into its midst (Schell & Delury, 2013: 159)

marked, change to this, characterised by what might be termed a highly political *de-politicisation*, accompanied by rapid marketisation.

For the first time since the late 1970s, newspapers immediately found themselves required to adhere absolutely to the Party's *political* line. There was a re-establishment of the principle that the press needed to perform ideological functions which encouraged unity, explicated government policy and focused on the positive. However, rather than encourage a specific treatment of politics, newspapers were encouraged to simply shrink the space for political news and commentary and, conversely, expand the scope for non-political news. While political subjects became unambiguously off-limits, the Chinese press was 'unleashed', freed to pursue popular stories on issues of entertainment, commerce and anything non-political which would appeal to readers. The logic of the modern Chinese press – and Chinese social and economic life at large, one could argue – was established: largely unfettered, market-driven activities, contained within an authoritarian system where politics was reported, rather than discussed, and decisions by the Party's ruling technocrats were final.

In 1992 sweeping cuts to press subsidies were announced, forcing Party publications to seek new and independent sources of revenue (Akhavan-Majid, 2004: 557). As noted, advertising had first appeared widely in the 1980s but the withdrawal of subsidies accelerated this process. Party newspapers added explicitly market-oriented sections and mass-appeal 'weekend editions'. The second half of the decade and the first half of the new millennium saw a proliferation of new metropolitan dailies and business-focused newspapers (Zhao, 2008: 77).

The 1990s saw the "rise of de facto privately run newspapers" (Akhavan-Majid, 2004: 557) with government entities actually contracting out their publishing licences. "Legally, these papers [were] 'owned' by the licence holder and [were] subject to its editorial supervision. In practice, however, full operational, editorial and financial responsibility for the paper [was] assumed by the private investor" (ibid).

Continued political control of the press

The post-reform press in China was formally released from the totalising philosophy whereby *all* news was propaganda of one sort or another. But it was released not into

the wild, but rather into a complex environment configured by longstanding institutional restrictions. This basic structure remains in place today.

There are three main strands to this bargain. Firstly, no newspaper can be set up as an independent business; secondly, a strict licencing system operates whereby any new publication needs specific permission to legally publish and market itself; and thirdly, since 2003 at least, a 'sponsor unit' is required of each publication. This unit needs to be a recognized institutional publisher who can be specifically held responsible for the output of the publication, and thus who can be relied upon to screen for sensitive content (Brady, 2010: 115). Censorship is thus delegated, but delegated to trusted partners.

These three core planks are supported by an array of measures which seeks to maintain what might be deemed a remote form of political control. Baum suggests there are three "concentric circles" of media control in the post 1990s media sphere. Beijing-based central media such as the *People's Daily*, cling to a Maoist model where every word is honed; at the intermediary level are regional media outlets which enjoy relative freedom; and at the periphery is commercial "fringe media" (Baum, 2008). The vast majority of printed output in modern China is not subject to routine review by censorial bodies though a formal review process does exist and direct communiques to editors are occasionally issued by the Central Propaganda Department and its local equivalents. These may explain subjects which are impermissible, which topics must be carried, which subjects are to be emphasised (Brady, 2010: 95)²². In areas of potential sensitivity, senior publications may establish the substance and the *tifa* – approved linguistic constructions and collocations – to be used in such articles through exemplar editorials in the likes of the *People's Daily* and *Xinhua* (Shambaugh, 2007). However, one of the conclusions of a 2013 symposium convened to discuss an archive of propaganda instructions sent to media outlets across China found that local propaganda officials tended to be diligent within their own jurisdiction but could not extend that censorial reach to other areas, with the

²² These have been catalogued by the China Digital Times website, though the majority are claimed to be leaks from working journalists and are not independently verified. See <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/ministry-of-truth/>

effect that “[n]ews of a scandal in Henan, blocked in Henan, might appear in Shanxi” (Link, 2013b: 4).

Other forms of control include adoption of the Soviet-styled nomenklatura system which functions by making the hiring and firing of all senior personnel in the media (as well as education and cultural) sector a responsibility of the Central Propaganda Department (Ke, 2010: 52). There exists a long history of senior media positions being filled by those who have been parachuted in from senior Party roles and who often return to full-time governmental duties. Journalists, too, are encouraged to join the Party, making them disciplinable under Party rules if they err in their work²³ (Brady, 2010: 116).

Perhaps the most important form of political control at work in newsrooms is the self-censorship born of ambiguity (Stern & Hassid, 2012). According to the “Provisional Rules for the Administration of Periodicals”, there are eight specific offences which periodicals must avoid making. These include “inciting subversion of the regime of the people's democratic dictatorship and the socialist system, national division, rebellion or rioting”, “inciting opposition to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party”, “divulging state secrets, jeopardising national security or harming national interests”, and “insulting or slandering other people” (Chang, Wan & Qu, 2003, cited by Shambaugh, 2007). Breaches of these rules may result in a newspaper being permanently closed but defining them is extremely problematic. The ambiguity of the legal framework thus naturally creates a climate of self-censorship amongst news workers which complements specific information management²⁴.

²³ The CCP's disciplinary system can involve so-called *shuanggui* – literally, ‘double regulations’ – detention, where Party members are held incommunicado for up to six months while investigations are carried out. Most detainees are accused of ‘corruption’. Ren Jianming of Tsinghua University believes that the majority of the 140,000 or so officials who are investigated each year are detained under *shuanggui* terms (Economist, 2012a).

²⁴ This kind of ambiguity also appears to be at the heart of the current (2014) campaign to instil discipline into Party members themselves. Numerous Party officials have been detained in an ongoing and self-proclaimed ‘anti-corruption campaign’, credited to the leadership of Xi Jinping. Many corruption cases have been reported in the Chinese press. Indeed, *The Beijing News* (http://epaper.bjnews.com.cn/html/2014-04/16/content_506503.htm) went so far as to analyse the language used to describe the charges and found that there was little reliable correlation between specific crimes and specific charges. Officials, therefore, have no way of knowing what specific ‘crimes’ – how many mistresses or how much personal wealth, for example – may trigger investigation. No obvious logic drives corruption charges and thus all who are *somewhat* corrupt are encouraged to rein in their behaviour in an attempt to stay on the right side of an ambiguous and shifting moral line.

This section has focused on the possibilities for control in a commercialisation media environment but the chief strategy may be said to be encouraging non-political, non-sensitive news to permeate the fiscally and administratively decentralised commercial media sphere. The lowering of ideological restrictions, along with the introduction of new technologies of electronic communication, discussed above, has increased the volume and flow of “spontaneous, unscripted information” (Baum, 2008: 162) but, for the reasons outlined above, this has not resulted in the kind of polyphonic political journalism that was glimpsed, briefly, in the 1980s.

Public Opinion ‘Guidance’ and ‘Channelling’

There have been attempts to update this vision of a *depoliticised* newspaper market. Even through the 1990s, newspapers were tasked with some kind of political role (Chan, 2007). This is in evidence in the concept of ‘public opinion guidance’ (*yulun daoxiang*), a virtual buzzword under the leadership of Jiang-Zhu (Qian & Bandurski, 2011: 56) and harking back to a Maoist vision of the media and media function²⁵. In the Hu-Wen era, this concept was replaced by the notion of public opinion ‘channelling’ (*yulun yindao*). This approach recognised that the Party had lost ground amid the rise of commercial media and the Internet, and that, in recognition of the new media landscape, would be better served proactively pushing its messages through the new channels open to it, rather than relying solely on what might be termed ‘old-fashioned’ methods of censorship and information control (ibid). Channelling was not intended to imply that control had been abandoned. Rather, journalists were encouraged to be active and speedy in their reporting but work must be carried out within boundaries.

The term “guidance” was first introduced by Hu Jintao at the national ideology work conference in January 2008 (Qian, 2013) and was re-emphasised in June 2008 during a speech made at the *People’s Daily* editorial office. Some have argued that 2008 was a watershed moment in the realisation of the need for a new approach, principally around the Tibetan uprising of that March and the subsequent banning of foreign reporters from visiting the scene (Qian & Bandurski, 2011: 56). To borrow the language of public relations, this created significant reputational damage for China at

²⁵ See Schell and Delury’s summary of Mao’s ideas on elite ‘guidance’ of common opinion, drawn from the 1942 Talks at the Yan’an Forum of Art and Literature (2013: 225).

a moment, in the run up to the Beijing Olympic Games, when the country's media managers were desperate to impress on the global stage. The relative transparency demonstrated the following year, during unrest in Xinjiang, was the response, and evidence of lessons learned. Some have seen this policy deepening under Xi's post-2013 leadership (Anderlini, 2013).

Another key term frequently used in relation to the media is that of 'supervision of public opinion' (*yulun jiandu*), suitably ambiguous in the sense that it is not clear whether public opinion is supervised *by* the media – thus making it similar to public opinion guidance – or whether it is public opinion which itself supervises the work of government, a democratic notion which has, at times, been embraced by officials. The latter definition is closely related to the concept of 'watchdog journalism', a term which chimes with fourth-estate notions of Anglophone journalism (see page 108) and which has been used by some investigative journalists working within commercial media to justify their activities. However, such tactics have been damned within Party press editorialising for being motivated by commercial gain and their association with corrupt practices (Gu, 2014). Though indirect, such editorials may be read as a form of control.

Commercial Newspapers: From Within or Without?

The most enduring debate within scholarly circles engaged with Chinese media is around the extent to which the logic described above – market activities contained within authoritarian embrace – is "contradictory logic". Put another way, is there a natural tension between Party demands and the pursuit of profit, between "the party line and the bottom line" (Zhao, 1998)? And, if so, is that tension likely to lead to an unpicking of Party control over the media. To a large extent, these mirror and prefigure the later debates around Internet usage, described in the following chapter.

Lynch (1999), Wu (2000) and Yu (2013) see the media's propaganda role as in decline due to commercialisation, while Akhavan-Majid (2004), Lee, He and Huang (2006), Zhao (2008) and Brady (2010) find the Party has been able to strengthen ideological control, not only *in spite* of commercialisation but *because* of commercialization.

To take the latter set of arguments first, Zhao rejects the notion that there is a simple “dual-track system” (Ke, 2010) in operation in China, neatly divided between the Party press and the commercial press. She points out that it is “party-state organs themselves [who] have spearheaded the process of commercialization, adopting and containing the market mechanisms within the existing structure” (Zhao, 2008: 79-80). An example of this may be seen right at the top of the newspaper hierarchy. The *People’s Daily*, the organ of the Central Committee of the CCP, is the Party paper *par excellence*; an eight-page daily carrying news which often assumes knowledge of arcane political debate and, thus, likely to be of interest to a limited audience. However, it operates a sister paper, *The Global Times*, which, while perhaps carrying the institutional imprimatur in its tendency to focus on ‘big’ stories of international scope, does so in a colloquial and emotive manner in an effort to appeal the mass-market and advertisers. In other situations, a single newspaper may operate a twin-track edition where the front page carries austere political news, while inner-sections comprise soft, commercial fare.

Moreover, market mechanisms may not only be *contained* within the structure but may be actually *exploited* for the purposes of control. The 14th Party Congress in 1992 made explicit provision for economic controls coming to replace purely political control in the cultural and arts sphere (Brady, 2010: 111). The Party regulates the space for commercial activities and, thus, by opening and closing profit-making avenues, can secure political obedience (Lee et al, 2006). All major ‘metro’ newspapers which emerged in the mid-1990s are, for example, subsidiaries of provincial or national party organs. While party organs are mandated to serve both urban and rural areas and are thus unattractive to advertisers, metro newspapers may reach the commercially lucrative mass-appeal market in core urban centres and because they are affiliated with central or provincial party organs and are thus above the political jurisdiction of municipal party authorities, they are able to write critical reports on municipal affairs. These papers, which operate as semi-autonomous business units of the traditional central and provincial party organs serve as a means for the Party to reach the affluent urban consumer strata. At the same time, they function as ‘cash cows’ that cross subsidise the traditional Party organs (Zhao, 2008) but retain political discipline because of their reliance on Party publications.

Zhao sees in this evidence of the state harnessing market forces to buttress both its financial and ideological clout. “...if the revolutionary and Maoist era CCP had only the traditional organs to reach both its rank-and-file officials and the masses, party-controlled media commercialisation has now enabled the CCP to divide the task among two primary press segments: the traditional party organs, which serve as a means of intra-party communication between its leadership and its grassroots units, and the mass-appeal newspapers, which serve as a means by which the CCP reconstitutes and rearticulates the terms of its hegemony with the rising middle class” (Zhao, 2008: 158).

However, beyond the broad bifurcation between Party and ‘mass appeal’ publications, elucidated above, two powerful niche markets may also be identified which have their roots in the marketization that followed Deng’s ‘Southern Tour’ (*Nan Xun*)²⁶ (Qian, 2014; Brady, 2010). One is the intellectually-oriented press – with *Southern Weekend* and its sister-paper within the Nanfang newspaper group, the *Southern Metropolis Daily (SMD)* being prominent examples – and the elite business press, an exemplar being the business magazine *Caixin*. These publications earned a reputation for a more outspoken, investigative and antagonistic form of journalism in China in the mid-1990s (Brady, 2010: 58) which has drawn substantial scholarly focus, particularly from those who have seen evidence of the power of the market to push back against the Party. In arguing for a ‘golden period’ for commercial media in the years 1995 to 2005, Shi (2014) specifically cites Nanfang group newspapers and *Caixin* as a site of independent public opinion generation. Qian (2014) suggests they represent market forces as seizing a share of power within the hitherto politically-dominated media sphere. The outbreak of the SARS virus was a boon to these specific publications, with the *SMD* being particularly brave in defying restrictions and reporting on the outbreak in early 2003 (Zhao, 2008: 253). Hu argues SARS prompted a period of growth in “market-oriented alternative journalism” (2014).

²⁶ The ‘Southern Tour’ – sometimes known as the ‘Southern Progress’ – involved Deng Xiaoping, then a very elderly and frail man, paying a symbolic visit to several of the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) which had been established in the 1980s in southern China during the PRC’s first major experiment with free market economics. The encouragement it gave to advocates of market-based economic reform within the Party was transformative and ultimately led to the side-lining of ‘leftists’ at the Party elite. The Southern Progress is thus generally regarded as the moment China clearly struck out on its current path of economic liberalisation after a two-year period of ambivalence following the 1989 crackdown on student protests.

Scholars working within this research furrow have tended to analyse and emphasise the supposed two-way battle between professionally-minded media workers and Party propagandists, with control sought by Party overseers and resisted by journalists. Yu argues that the subsidies received by newspapers made them fundamentally “beholden” to the Party-state, but that commercialisation had eroded their subservience (2013). “As the economic base crumbles, the superstructure threatens to collapse”, leading to events such as the one in early 2013 when *Southern Weekly* journalists effectively went on strike in protest at overbearing censorship practices. Some have characterised the relationship between journalists and the state as a constant game of push and pull, with boundaries being forever challenged and tested (Shambaugh, 2007; Tong, 2008; Yu, 2011). , These studies have certainly established that *some* journalists and editors consciously resist Party controls and have exploited opportunities created by media commercialisation and increasingly remote political oversight.

These strategies often have deep historical roots. The tradition of ‘opening a skylight’ (*kai tianchuang*) to protest censorship – leaving a section of the newspaper ostentatiously blank – has been used several times since the 1980s, most recently in 2009 in *Southern Weekend* (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). Likewise, there is the “venerable Chinese tradition of *chunqiu bifa*, expressing critical opinions in subtle or indirect linguistic ways” (Yang, 2014), or more vividly known as “pointing at the mulberry and abusing the locust” (*zhisang mahuai*) (Schoenhals, 1992: 124). Discussion of an historic incident which has obvious contemporary resonances is one notable tactic. The *6am Morning News* (*Jinchen Liudian*), a relatively minor Shandong newspaper, demonstrated the art in August 2012 when it printed a highly sensitive report on the outcome of the trial of Gu Kailai, wife of former-Politburo member, Bo Xilai. Though the newspaper dared not deviate from the strictly controlled court report, it did run an obviously allegorical report about a mouse trapped inside a beer can, immediately below the Gu Kailai story on the front page of the newspaper (Martinsen, 2012)²⁷.

²⁷ An even more iconic example of this is the classic 1961 play *Hai Rui Dismissed From Office* which damned Mao’s perseverance with the policies of the Great Leap Forward (*Da Yue Jin*) through the

Other resistance strategies have involved rushing stories into print – as was the case at the *SMD* in its reporting around Sun Zhigang²⁸ in 2003 and in a pro-Hu Yaobang editorial printed in the *World Economic Herald* as student protestors gathered in Beijing in April 1989 (Wright, 1990: 126) – or playing with typography, as when the Shanghai-based *Oriental Morning Post* blazed a tabloid-style front page banner concerning the dismissal of Beijing mayor Liu Zhihua in 2006 before asking readers to turn to an inner page for more on the story where the official two-line Xinhua story was printed (Brady, 2010: 106).

These examples certainly point to a level of dissatisfaction among parts of the commercial Chinese press around political control. However, it would be misleading to characterise the examples given above as commonplace in the Chinese press. Most reporters and editors follow most of the rules most of the time.

Professionalisation

Anticipating later discussions around protest and the Internet, debates around the Chinese press tend to identify two models, one a ‘strong state’ model in which tensions are comfortably contained, and the other a ‘resistance’ model where threats emanate up from the grassroots and pose a challenge to the elite. In terms of the media, where commercialisation is seen as the threat, some scholars have sought a way out of this bind by seeking new pastures for academic enquiry.

Perhaps the dominant debate revolves around concepts of professional practice within the Chinese press. That is, to what extent are there universal standards of what it means to be a ‘professional’ journalist, and to what extent do Chinese journalists operate within a different paradigm of journalistic practice?

Though the term is contested, there exist three fairly straightforward and uncontentious definitions of a ‘professional’: one, as someone who earns their living

vehicle of a Ming era court drama. An article responding to this perceived criticism was the spark for the launching of the Cultural Revolution, as discussed on page 38.

²⁸ Sun Zhigang was a university graduate from Hubei who died in 2003 while in police custody in Guangzhou. He had been arrested for failing to produce a local residents’ permit and ID card and was subsequently beaten to death in circumstances that have never been fully explained. The story of the case was investigated by the *Southern Metropolis Daily* and rushed into print, despite attempts locally to have the story quashed. The reporting is often cited as leading directly to national laws surrounding the detention of so-called ‘illegal residents’ to be annulled.

from an occupation; two, as someone who demonstrates mastery of the *technical* norms of an occupation; and, three, someone who is a member of an occupational group that enjoys high social status.

Some have seen notions of professionalism as transformative in the Chinese context, allowing journalists to begin the pushback against the twin bulwarks of the market and elite politics and establish a 'professional' commercial media. In a 2005 study, Zhou "detected a convergence in professional values and a transformation towards professionalism, of which the internet is a key catalyst" (2005; 198). Similarly, Tong notes that adherence to 'professional' standards has become an "ideological weapon" for journalists of the *Southern Metropolis Daily* (2008).

Others have problematized the entire notion of what it means to be a professional in the Chinese context. Pan and Lu cite professionalism as one of the four main journalistic discourses²⁹ (2003). However, professionalism as an ideology is truncated and fragmented, they claim (ibid). "Chinese journalists appropriate diverse and often conflicting ideas of journalism to construct and 'localize' professionalism through 'their improvised and situated practices' in a rapidly transforming media system" (Pan and Lu, 2003).

Yu points to what this means in practice. She argues that journalists "have learned to self-censor rather than risk letting any politically incorrect views or news pass the gate of mainstream media. [Their] gatekeeping... is a mix of professional ethics, political pressure and market imperative. And agenda setting is no longer determined by the party state alone but negotiated among various socio-politico-economic powers" (2011: 381). In other words, whereas in the ideals of British journalism, to be 'professional' is to *put aside* the pressures of business and politics, or perhaps even battle directly against them, in their pursuit of 'news', Chinese journalists integrate their professional 'news sense' for what a reader might find interesting, with the competing pressures of politics and business. This ability thus becomes a part of their professionalism. Zhou puts it as follows:

²⁹ The others are the "party-press", "Confucian intellectualism", and the "market economy"

...after working for two bosses [the Party and the market] for such a long period, Chinese journalists have found their own way to balance between propaganda missions and professional pursuits in daily practices. In order to avoid conflicts between attitudes and behaviours, they have managed to internalize and integrate two streams of professional beliefs into one value system. This unexpected finding might have two implications. First, journalistic professionalism in China is not a revolution that modern values suddenly suppress orthodox values. Rather it is a slow process in which the pro- and anti-professionalism forces coexist and interact with each other for a long time. Second, Chinese journalists are not determined in the process of professionalism, but are always ready to make compromise” (2005: 196-197).

While recognising the inescapability of political discussions, other scholars have tried to orient the discussion away from an explicit focus on Party control. De Burgh’s study into the attitudes of individual journalists foregrounds the cultural attitudes which also weigh in on ostensible professional practice in China. Journalists in China operate in a culture still touched by Confucian principles of social responsibilities and deference to established hierarchy, he argues. It is, therefore, this, rather than worries over political sensitivities or market concerns, that leads to the stated reluctance to ‘over-report’ bad news (De Burgh, 2003). Even so-called ‘Good Official’ Chinese journalists – those who may be minded to expose wrong-doing or highlight negative areas – “do not share the iconoclastic, outsider status of the western model, but are deeply bound up with the system and seek to project their righteousness from within” (ibid: 155). In other words, to be ‘professional’ in China may be to be restrained and subtle in the way one writes stories that impinge on a national debate.

Hassid presents a typology of idealised professionals in China. These include traditional ‘throat and tongue’ (*houshe*) journalists, trusting in the Party and committed to its discipline, US-style professionals who cling to a belief in the truth at all costs, advocacy journalists who write consciously to influence elite opinion makers, and workaday journalists who regard the production of content purely as a means to earn a living (2011).

In summary, discussion around professionalism in the Chinese media can still tend to get dragged into a model where state is pitched in a two-way contest *against* society, as it was often in the early commercialisation debates.

Summary

As we have seen, the Chinese press is historically constituted and has a particularly important place in the history of the PRC, where it has been instrumental in triggering major political campaigns and exposing political divisions at various levels of the political hierarchy. The institutional changes of the 1980s have resulted in a highly diversified newspaper market which has a pronounced commercial underpinning. Indeed, certain parts of the Chinese newspaper market are, in some aspects of their coverage, scarcely less lurid than the British red-tops.

Within academic debate, there are different opinions as to whether commercialisation has resulted in fundamental change in the Chinese press. Some of those who once argued that commercialisation would inevitably result in change have updated their views in the light of the apparent ability of the Party-State to manage the tension between commercial and political interests. Lynch (2010) seems to have rethought his earlier (1999) prediction on the effect of commercialisation on the Chinese press to bring it more in line with Zhao's (2008) perspective. The conclusion is that commercialisation has not resulted in a commensurate break-down in Party control. On the contrary, the Party has proved highly adept at "...manag[ing] its interests, images and national consciousness in different guises" (Lee et al, 2006). As Stockmann and Gallagher have it, "marketization of the media can coexist with authoritarian political control over media content" (2011: 442). With the exception of a short period in the mid-to-late 1980s, the Party has shown little tendency to surrender ultimate control of the press, though challenges to the control structure remain.

Chapter 3: Social Contention in China

Introduction

This thesis examines and evaluates the role of the Chinese press through the prism of social contention. This chapter moves the discussion on to an examination of a broad sweep of literature which swirls around the second of these two distinct fields. It begins by examining the rise in social contention in China and placing it in historic and cultural context. It continues with an examination of a platform which exhibits and, perhaps, partially *explains* the rise in contemporary social contention in China – the Internet. Taken together, these two sections paint a picture of an environment in which top-down political control is being challenged and eroded, though there are lengthy discussions on alternative perspectives which challenge the notion that these aspects represent a genuine threat to the Party-state.

Protest in China

Protest in Historical Context

Far from the clichéd image of the Chinese as an enduringly resolute and stoic people, prepared to suffer fate's varied blows for the sake of harmony and the 'pleasure of heavenly agreement' (*tianlun zhile*), "[n]o country boasts a more enduring or more colourful history of rebellion and revolution than China" (Perry, 2001). Though pre-modern examples abound, one cannot help but be drawn to the 19th century cataclysms of the Taiping Rebellion (*Taiping Tianguo Qiyi*) – probably the bloodiest conflict in human history in absolute terms – the Dungan Revolt (*Tongzhi Xinjiang Huibian*) which followed, the turn-of-century Boxer Uprising (*Yihetuan Qiyi*) and Mao Zedong's so-called Cultural Revolution (*Wenhua Da Geming*) when considering China's propensity for mass unrest, co-ordinated to greater or lesser extents. The Xinhua Revolution of 1911 ended Qing rule and proved a precursor to what Hung calls a "century of revolutions" (2010: 201). That protest in China was, and remains, a subject of enduring relevance is made manifest by the fact that the ruling Communist Party of China was, itself, birthed in the widespread outrage following the May 4th protest movement (*Wusi Yundong*).

Such precedents perhaps explain why the fear of chaos (*luan*) is particularly acute in China (Dryzek et al, 2002: 50). In some ways, China's fear of disorder is comparable to the American fear of the 'Leviathan' of big government. Though the former has never been formally woven into the nation's political mission-statement, as it has in the latter, they both represent a core aspect of the respective nation's social psychology and, concomitantly, a primary ingredient in the assumed recipe for happiness and prosperity.

Despite this, there is clear evidence for a recent rise in social contention. China began to issue statistics on public disturbances, or so-called 'mass incidents' (*qunzhong shijian*) in 1993 when there were 8,700 events recorded nationally. This policy was disbanded in 2005 after a tenfold increase in just 12 years (Perry, 2010: 11). Tanner focuses in particular on the acceleration in incidents in the 1990s and claims that, during this decade, there was "not a single year during this period did unrest increase by less than 9 percent" (2004: 138). He also notes the "clear trend toward larger and larger demonstrations, many involving hundreds, thousands or even tens of thousands of protestors" (2004: 141).

There is no exhaustive typology of protest, but the following categories, identified by Perry and Seldon (2010), point to the kind of issues that lie behind these statistics. They cite: tax riots, labour strikes, inter-ethnic clashes, religious rebellion, election disputes, environmental protest, gender protest, pro-democracy and free speech protest. Yu (2009b) identifies another significant protest category, that of the 'anger-venting' event, which draws on pent up local frustrations and is made in response to a specific event but which transcends the initial motivation in terms of the variety of people drawn into the protest and the lack of clarity of its purpose or targets.

Given both the *propensity for*, and the *fear of* social contention in China, it is no wonder that numerous scholars have seen fit to investigate the history and significance of protest and rebellion. Surveying the literature, however, it's possible to stake out at least two distinct analytical paradigms, each of which has generated sub-branches of investigation as time went on.

Democracy and Authoritarianism

The most obvious question that has been asked of the phenomenon of protest in the modern era is the extent to which the demonstrable rise in social contention indicates improved prospects for democratization and an increased threat to authoritarianism. This paradigm imagines state-society relations to be in a state of flux, with the locus of change being one or other of the constituent actors; either signs of democratic social forces extending their scope of activity vis-à-vis the state, or the state being forced into a process of authoritarian adaptation in a bid to forestall change.

The events of 1989 loom large within this paradigm. They appeared to indicate that the forces of democratisation were in the ascendancy and those of authoritarianism in retreat (Mackinnon, 1994). Studies of these events, and their legacy, have tended to interrogate the motives and methods of protestors. Perry (2002), for example, points to the failures of the protestors to break free of traditional constraints, such as respectful remonstrance, their search for political patrons, and their stress of moralism³⁰. Others point to the classic conception of the 'grand' – albeit tacit – bargain between society and state which flowed from 1989. Under this, the state is said to have guaranteed improved living standards for the people who, in return, accept the Party retains political monopoly³¹. On the authoritarian side, others have focused on state repression in attempting to explain why the protests failed and tend to argue that it is the fear of what happened in 1989 which has prevented something similar happening again (Link, 2014).

Bringing the debate up to date, there is some discernible variation within both sides of the democratic-authoritarian argument. In the first category, the 'liberation' strand, the focus is on citizen activities, and debates swirl around the extent to which increased contention indicates an emergent 'civil society' (Lagerkvist, 2012). Göbel and Ong (2013), similarly, suggest that social unrest should be seen as a form of

³⁰ Perry tends to work more within the historical-cultural approach to protest in China, and argues that the failure of the 1989 protest movement was also down to historical factors such as the CCP's enduring legitimacy, conferred by its revolutionary success in 1949; the vast and somewhat backward peasant population; and the 'fetter[s]' imposed by a conservative intellectual elite (2002: 310-311).

³¹ For a classic expression of this argument, see Whyte, 2010.

political participation, one that signifies “the desire of an increasingly complex society to take part in the allocation of political and material values” (2010: 21).

In the second category, the ‘adaptive authoritarian’ strand, commentators largely focus on the behaviours of the state in seeking to explain why fundamentals have not changed. Writings in this category still tend to be premised on assumptions of creeping democratization – the notion that the historical trend points towards greater openness and individual freedoms – but focus, instead, on how the CCP is adapting to this ostensible threat. Most suggest that the CCP is up to the task (Brady, 2010; Tanner, 2004; Lorentzen, 2013) – perhaps reflecting the fact that, thanks to economic and military expansions, the Chinese state has rarely appeared stronger than it does today. However, some still argue that, in the face of the aforementioned pressures, the CCP sits on the brink of ruin and that authoritarian adaptation signals a futile raging against the dying of the Maoist light (Su et al, 2013).

There is, however, relative consensus concerning the fact that increased contention does not neatly translate into a fully-fledged civil society and that, on the face of it at least, the Party-state is currently coping with an increasingly assertive citizenry. This then has forced scholars working within this paradigm to look for new questions. On the libertarian front, there is a pronounced interest in the issue of ‘rights’. Though ‘civil society’ may not have yet emerged, to what extent are Chinese people seeking to articulate, define and defend so-called ‘rights’? On the authoritarian front, scholars increasingly wonder whether increased social contention might not be positively state-bolstering. In other words, is the CCP not only engaged in a rear-guard defence against an advancing populace, but perhaps also using these forces to strengthen itself? These two strands will be examined in the following two sub-sections.

Rights Consciousness

Western ideologies of Christianity, Marxism-Leninism and even nationalism have demonstrably provided *some kind* of foundation for disaffected Chinese to launch challenges to a variety of authoritarian states. Some scholars have sought to investigate the extent to which universal ‘human rights’ might be the latest form of this phenomenon.

A number of scholars (Li & O'Brien, 1996; Gallagher, 2005) have argued that there is, indeed, evidence of an emergent 'rights consciousness' (*quanli yishi*) within Chinese society. Li and O'Brien (1996) have discussed the notion of rights discourse in modern Chinese rural protest, though concede it is somewhat different to the universalist rights discourse espoused in the first set of amendments to the American constitution. They point to a growing rights consciousness, which inspires villagers to use theoretical rights to appeal to lofty ideals of justice, albeit within a framework circumscribed by the Party. Li and O'Brien point to a typology which divides villagers into policy-focused researching *diaomin*, tough and stubborn *dingzhu*, and compliant *shunmin* (1996). Though not representative of the whole, *diaomin* employ what might be termed an arch-rationalism where strategies maximise chances of success and minimise chances of repression in context of authoritarian rule.

Hung (2010) has looked at contemporary *wei quan* (维权) movements, referring to the "various actions that ordinary people and social activists have employed to defend their legal rights or the rights of others" (Hung, 2010) emerging from the sense of bureaucratic responsiveness to appeals to rights ostensibly guaranteed under China's current constitution. It would be an overstatement to say that these actions have coalesced into a 'movement'. Indeed, issues range across a number of distinct fields, cultural, political, social and economic, and actors may be peasant farmers, activist journalists or pioneering lawyers, all of whom are likely to declare their ignorance of and isolation from other actors. Though sharing some similarities with the democracy movement of the 1980s, *wei quan* practitioners are usually at pains to declare their loyalty to China's current political arrangements. *Wei quan* protests are usually issue-specific and make narrow appeals to theoretical protections while tacitly acknowledging the political legitimacy of its current ruling Party.

Protest in authoritarian adaptation

Being an organisation which arose out of a period of huge social contention, the relationship between the CCP and protest is complex. The Party learned from the very beginning how to co-opt and exploit antagonistic currents in society. After taking power, then, one should be careful to assume that protest is inherently state-threatening. The CCP's ultimate victory in 1949 has often been put down to its

success in mobilising the peasantry in rebellion and inculcating cross-regional class consciousness but as Bianco (1975) points out, 1949 did not represent a revolution from below. Rather, the “rural masses remain the first and foremost object of mobilisation and manipulation” (1975: 331).

Bringing things into the modern era, the permitting of protest is seen by some as an exercise in surveillance, both of lower-level officials and social discontent. Allowing protest thus helps to “limit corruption and to bring discontented groups of citizens out into the open rather than driving them underground” (Lorentzen, 2013). Tarrow agrees: “China’s current leadership is well aware that high-profile coercion can exacerbate diplomatic tensions, boost public sympathy for protesters, and radicalize participants (Tarrow, 1998: 149)”. The solution, therefore, is to permit and control.

More than this, protest may actually constitute a *resource* for the state as it sets about maintaining power and refining governance strategies. Lorentzen argues the increasing incidence of protest is, counter-intuitively, a sign of the health of the Chinese state. Iconic protests such as those which took place across the Greater Tibet region in the Spring of 2008 or in major Chinese cities in the Spring of 1989, demonstrate clearly that the state is more than capable of putting down protest if it chooses to, but, more often than not, opts for a different approach. Protest, he argues, has an informational quality; in China’s post-totalitarian society, marketisation and decentralisation have disrupted traditional information flows. Protest, thus, allows various tiers of government to identify communities where discontent is rife and make interventions. Protest can thus become a pseudo-bureaucratic mechanism where, in lieu of the presence of robust regal structures and systems of regulatory oversight, corruption is kept in check. By such means, protest may have salubrious effects on local justice and reinforce the overall political structure.

O’Brien argues that permissiveness towards dissent is indeed a ‘high-wire legitimisation strategy’ (2009: 27) which demonstrates state responsiveness and reflects a belief that issues can be resolved. Rather than reflecting a systemic crisis within Chinese governance, protest actually points to there being a groundswell of *trust* in the system, particularly at the national level (Göbel & Ong, 2012; Trevaskes,

2012). Research at the grassroots level (Li & O'Brien, 1996; Guo, 2001; Cai, 2010) suggests this is so.

Göbel and Ong suggest that the events of 2008 – with riots in Tibetan regions, and security management around the Beijing Olympic Games, as well as manifold other social protest events – marked a turning point in the state's handling of large groups. "The police have shifted their strategy from quelling demonstrations with force to a permissive strategy of 'containment and management' (2012: 13). In this frame, the apparent increase in incidence of protest is less about rights consciousness, an emergence of civil society, or even about an increase in grievances, but rather represents an adaptive political strategy (Lorentzen, 2013: 24).

Using a methodology similar to Lorentzen's, Cai (2012) examines the issue largely from the point of view of the Party-state and is concerned to test the variables which both explain the presence of protest and its various outcomes. He suggests that collective resistance to combat illegality or malfeasance is expressed in three ways: through *law*, *media representations*, and *petitions*. He argues street action is likely only when these strategies have failed. The effectiveness of street action is determined by three further factors: *media coverage*, *casualties* and the *number of participants*. These factors influence how much *pressure* is applied to officials local to the protest site. This pressure, in turn, derives from the threat of social disorder from below, or from angry officials higher up the political food-chain.

Unlike Lorentzen, Cai does attempt to examine both protestor strategies and government response, albeit within a rigid positivist frame, but ultimately agrees that power lies entirely with the Party-state, and that opportunities for political participation in China derives from the "opportunities produced by central-local divide" (2010).

Cai acknowledges the fractures in the governance structure which may allow for democratic forces to push back on authoritarian tendencies. However, too many scholars working within this framework offer a picture of Machiavellian governance perfection, in which every positive is the result of strategic brilliance, and every negative is able to be spun into a positive. Such a perspective clashes starkly with the impression one forms in China, where disorganisation and ham-fisted compromises

appear the order of the day. In seeking to redress the ‘political change’ bias (Hildebrandt, 2014) inherent in the democratic, libertarian strand of what I have called the Democratic-Authoritarian paradigm, Lorentzen and others assume too much of the counter-argument and end up exhibiting what may be termed a ‘political stasis bias’ – endless explanations of why everything is destined to remain the same.

Tanner (2004) and Göbel and Ong (2012) encounter a similar problem by clinging to a simplistic conception of the authoritarian state – one that is preternaturally sage and strategic. Despite each conducting a comprehensive analysis of trends in modern Chinese protest, they ultimately argue for an ingeniously protean and adaptable Party-state which is just too smart to be outwitted. Göbel and Ong do point out that “local government’s response to social unrest is subject to local variations and generally lacks co-ordination by the central government” (2012: p54), but this concession only bolsters the sense that, at the national level, the scheming is brilliantly strategic³².

There are other ways of viewing the issue of protest in China, as the following section demonstrates. These focus on historical and cultural continuities which cannot easily be accommodated in the liberal-authoritarian explanations.

The Historical-Cultural Approach

The previously discussed paradigm asks questions around the relationship between the Chinese state and Chinese society and supposes change, of some sort, within one or other of the constituent actors – democratic change from below in an extension of the scope of social action, or governmental change from above as part of a process of authoritarian adaptation. Other scholars, however, have avoided the transitological trap, alluded to in the previous chapter, by examining protest in terms of China’s particular historical and cultural contingencies. This may be seen as a socio-psychological approach to the study of protest which links behaviour to cultural traits which are historically embedded. Such a tradition, by definition, looks for

³² This attitude recalls the confusion over the oft-cited words of former China premier, Zhou Enlai who, in reply to a question by Kissinger about the effects of the French Revolution, was said to have replied that it was “too early to tell”, despite almost 200 years having elapsed. Such a view played well into popular conceptions of Chinese as highly strategic and deeply philosophical long-term thinkers. It was many years before it became clear that Zhou had misunderstood the question, and was actually speaking about the 1968 Paris protests.

consistencies between past protest forms and those of the modern era, and for similarities in governance strategies.

One of the most important organising principles in this work is, as Chen (2011) and Hung (2011) point out, the idea that most protest in China is local – something as true today as it was in the imperial past – and that attempts to see protest in terms of the existential threat they pose to the regime miss the point. It should be remembered that even the most serious and sustained protest movement of the post-revolution era in the PRC – the 1989 student protests – made no concerted attempt to argue for ‘regime change’.

Social management

Those seeking to understand social contention within the Democratic-Authoritarian paradigm, discussed above, have tended to take the tenets of Marxism-Leninism at their word. That is, they accept as unproblematic the claim by the ruling communist party that it speaks for, and on behalf of, the ‘masses’, and, thus, sees existential threat when signs of rupture emerge within the imagined homogenous mass of the people, imagining it to be anti-Party by its nature (Tanner, 2004: 143).

However, in a rebuke to those who see the runes of ruin in rising social contention, Perry argues that, in fact, traditional Chinese political theory recognizes the legitimacy of revolt. Indeed, “[t]he successful management of disturbances was the *sine qua non* of long-lived dynasties” (2010: 27).

The foundation stone of this culturally-constituted political philosophy is the so-called ‘Mandate of Heaven’. Under this Mencian conception of political legitimacy with its roots in the Shang dynasty (second millennium BC), the ruler of the nation was blessed with celestial favour by the very fact of his occupation of the seat of power (McGregor, 2010). However, this favour could not be relied on implicitly. If an aspirant, for example, was able to wrest control of the seat of power by force, he would, by the very fact of his victory, gain moral sanction for his rule.

In one way, this may be seen as a fatalistic philosophy – in vernacular terms, ‘you get what you deserve, and you deserve what you get’. From another perspective, it provided a mechanism for the transfer of power which could not be said to exist in,

for example, medieval England where the king exercised a 'divine right', with any attempt to usurp this rule portrayed as an affront to Heaven. In this sense, the imperial Chinese system was philosophically 'open'. And should bidders for kingship exist, they were most obviously able to make their pitch for power through popular rebellion.

Protest and the countryside

Such popular rebellion, historically, would have been seen as emanating from the countryside. In an age where so much discussion of China is saturated in the discourse of development – GDP growth, urbanisation, technology – and where so much journalistic description and photographic imaging foregrounds the seemingly-ubiquitous symbols of modernity, it is a challenge to remember that China has historically been, and perhaps remains today, an agrarian society. Statistics produced in 2013 suggested that, for the first time, there were more people living in cities than in the countryside. Leaving aside the problematic definitions – China is a country where it is common to see farmers tilling fields beneath newly-built flyovers – it is fair to say that, even now, China is, at best, pivoted evenly between the city and country. Fei has argued that, industrialisation notwithstanding, China is destined to forever remain a “historically-constituted agrarian society” organised, as it is, around ritualised social relationships which have their roots in the village milieu (1992). It is not surprising, then, that much academic work on social contention in China places its emphasis on the relationship between the peasantry³³ and the governing classes.

Perry argues that the most enduring facet of protest in the Chinese context is what she calls “moral economy” appeals (2008a: 39). “For over two millennia, Chinese political thought, policy, and protest have assigned central priority to the attainment of socioeconomic security” (Perry, 2008a: 37). In such a conception, the state gains legitimacy and retains legitimacy by guaranteeing the majority peasant class the means and opportunity to feed themselves, what Perry calls “subsistence rights”.

Hung's extended discussion of peasant protest during the Qing-era (2011) deploys the concept of modernism to suggest how this conception of economic contention may

³³ Though venerated in Maoist ideology, 'peasant' (*nongmin*) has become as loaded a term in the modern Chinese context as it in post-industrial Europe where it has explicitly negative connotations and is colloquially used as a term of derision.

have developed. Modernism, he suggests, is defined as a move away from the parochial and traditional towards the universal and rational (2011). Though the defence of subsistence rights was, and remains, at the heart of much peasant protest, he argues that in the 'traditional', pre-modern conception of the state, Chinese peasants were likely to protest the state's impositions at the local level, where levies may threaten a community's ability to feed itself. In other words, peasant protest was primarily *reactive* to the state. As the power of the state grew in the 17th and 18th centuries, protestors more frequently made pro-active claims *on* the state and sought state support in pursuit of economic claims.

Hung argues that protest under the Qing was, essentially, cyclical in nature and protest tactics by peasant actors depended on changes to the political economy. Bluntly, when the state was strong, protestors tended to engage with the state structure presented to them; when it appeared weak, they tended to engage in strategies of resistance (2011). Thus modernity is not the *reason* peasant protestors engaged in collective action – there was no new-found, universalist sense of entitlement amongst peasants. Rather, there was a growing awareness of how best to engage or repel the state given the particular historic circumstances.

Bianco (1975, 2001) and others have examined the role of the peasantry in the rise of the CCP and the revolution of 1949. Interest in peasant contention faded during the Mao era, when the focus within protest writings was on elite politics and ideology. However, the period of reform and opening up sparked a renewed interest in peasant contention.

The years since 1980 have seen the countryside “[seethe] with tax riots and land disputes” (Perry, 2010: 21). Bernstein and Lu examine both the policies which antagonised peasants and perpetuated the “long festering crisis in the relations between peasants and the local state” (2000: 1). They also look to explain how these very same policies mitigate against collective action and suggest grassroots collective action should be separated from ideology – be it a class-based Maoism, Dengist developmentalism, or democratic transitology – and seen rather in terms of specific local interests. These were very often organised around subsistence issues, and in

which peasants pursue specific strategies which protest through close engagement with the state.

Perry (2010) builds on this work and discusses the contention caused in the countryside by the agricultural tax. The harsh, military response to the student demonstrations in 1989 led outside commentators to assume that potential protesters would defer from taking direct action. In fact, rural China was a hornet's nest of contention, Perry argues. "[There were] frequent report of beatings, property destruction, arson, and other violence targeting local cadres; instances of peasants killing cadres (and sometimes being hailed as heroes by their fellow villagers for doing so) were openly reported in the Chinese press" (2010: 20). Perry claims that the focus of rural contention moved from agricultural tax to land disputes after 2006 when central government abolished national agricultural tax. Again, the emphasis is on localism and state engagement.

Urban and Intellectual Protest

Noting the peculiar and culturally-specific qualities of peasant rebellion, scholars have tended to view urban protest within a completely different frame. One may further sub-divide by studies of urban working class protest, and studies of (overwhelmingly urban) intellectual contention.

Perry (2001, 2008a) has examined 20th century urban labour strikes. The widespread strikes in Shanghai in 1925 closed 100 factories and linked up various different sections of municipal society. Furthermore, "...the founding of the People's Republic certainly did not spell the end of labour unrest. In fact, every decade has brought a new round of widespread strikes" (2002: 319), from actions inspired by Mao's so-called 'Hundred Flowers' campaign in Shanghai in 1957 to those bound up with the Cultural Revolution in 1967. However, pre-1949, protest was occasionally characterised by trans-regional, trans-class, institutionally overlapping elements, as in Shanghai in 1925. However, while "frequent popular action – sometimes going beyond the confines of state-directed limits – was a distinctive feature of Mao's China" (2008: 209), deliberate strategies of fragmentation ensured that trans-class and trans-regional protest were closed down under Maoist rule.

Another important form of urban protest is intellectual contention. There was huge intellectual ferment in the latter decades of the 19th century as the Qing elite grappled with internal shocks and imperial incursions and sought strength through reform (Schell & Delury, 2013). However, one may argue these were primarily elite intellectual currents in which the vast majority Chinese had no means of participation. The two revolutions in 1911 and 1912, which engineered both the downfall of the Qing and ushered in the ill-fated early attempt at Republicanism, as well as the May 4th Movement, were similarly elite in nature and few would argue they represent a genuine revolution from below. Perry has argued that, while being highly active and important in policy formation, the intelligentsia has “tended to identify closely with the regime in power” (2002: 312). “An alienated academy did not emerge in China until the Twentieth Century under foreign tutelage” and perished after a “short-lived enlightenment” after the May 4th movement (ibid), she argues.

Protest repertoires

Many of the modern scholars working within the historical-cultural paradigm of Chinese protest have placed a particular emphasis on the *way* protest is enacted or performed. The deeply hierarchical conception of the state has resulted in the development of what Hung has called ‘repertoires’ (2011) of protest which have identifiable characteristics and draw from a cultural reservoir which incorporates many ‘traditional’ elements. These include a respect for hierarchy, a determination to acknowledge subservience, a tendency to “individualis[e] the source of the injustice to particular officials together with an actual or symbolic appeal to higher authorities” (Hung, 2010). Wasserstrom (1991) suggests the 1989 demonstrations, as well as the earlier student protests in Shanghai in 1986-7, have all exhibited some or all of these elements.

Perry describes it in the following way:

China differs from many other countries in that its dominant modes of unrest have for centuries taken the form of highly scripted protest repertoires intended not only to register indignation, but also to signal an interest in negotiation with an authoritarian state that takes such

deferential expressions of popular discontent extremely seriously (2010: 26)

Reworking the idea of ‘rights consciousness’ discussed in the previous sub-section, Perry (2010) and Yu (2009b) both argue that Chinese have instead a profound ‘rules consciousness’ (*guize yishi*) which strongly circumscribes the limits to contention and which is psychologically internalized by the majority of citizens.

However, connecting somewhat with the ‘rights consciousness’ discussion above, Hung acknowledges that the coming of Western ideas in 19th century added ideas such as rights-based protest, the rule of law ideology, and the possibility of new institutional mechanisms, but that these *enriched* rather than *replaced* the traditional forms of protest in China (2010).

Despite this, both Hung and Perry detect strong continuity between pre-20th century and modern protest in terms of the tendency for protesters to display filial loyalty towards a paternalist political centre and limit the source of their contention to individual local officials (Hung, 2010: 201; Perry, 2008b). Wasserstrom suggests that student movements, in particular, depend on the “[a]bility to usurp, appropriate, and adapt official modes of communication and ceremonial forms” (1991: 325-6). Chen, similarly, argues that modern protest represents a “bargaining process” (2009) with authorities – a term also used by Tanner (2004: 151) – and that protestors improve their position by engaging in a set of familiar, performative acts which engage higher-level officials or the wider public³⁴.

³⁴ In terms of the expression of protest, a distinction needs to be drawn between visible street protest and bureaucratic petitioning. One of the most enduring forms of the latter category is the so-called ‘Xinfang’ system, sometimes referred to as the ‘Shangfang’ system. In common with much street protest, Xinfang protestors seek to trigger the discretionary involvement of political actors by going outside the legal channels of state. Literally meaning ‘letters and visits’, Xinfang refers to the methods used to draw higher-level authorities into a local dispute. The letter writing is self-explanatory. The ‘visit’ refers to the habit of making a personal trip to the regional or even national seat of power to call for action. Though local governments may go to extraordinary lengths to prevent contact between citizens within their own jurisdiction and higher authorities – the 2012 case of rights activist Chen Guangcheng is an excellent example – scholars such as Chen (2009) argue that the system is an integral part of the feedback mechanism for high-level government, which welcomes information for the purposes of improved surveillance and better governance. There are Xinfang bureau (*Xinfang Ju*) at most tiers of government and a ‘State Bureau for Letters and Calls’ (*Guojia Xinfang Ju*) in Beijing. As Minzner points out, the Xinfang system sits uneasily with official legal institutions. While these have the veneer of independence, the Xinfang system derives its legitimacy and efficacy from the power of the CCP and individual officials (Minzner, 2006: 105). Estimates suggest there are almost twice as many

Protest and the media

Protest and the Chinese media

In most discussion of protest in China, the media is largely absent, hence the importance of this project. However, there are a few exceptions which were found in the literature.

Engaging the government and the wider public necessarily involves media strategies and Cai (2010) is one who identifies the importance of the media in social protest. However, he does so principally in terms of identifying it as a binary variable which may indicate other, more ostensibly important, outputs. In other words, if one *has* media coverage, one thing may happen; if one *doesn't have* media coverage, something else is likely. Ansfield (2012) and Fewsmith (2008) lean heavily on media coverage of protest to examine the nature of the protest itself, but do place the media coverage itself at the forefront of the analytical frame. Fewsmith argues that the presence of media coverage in the case of the Weng'an riot in July 2008 suggests a new relaxing of attitudes to media coverage of similar social events, something this thesis pursues.

Göbel and Ong (2012) draw a different conclusion and suggest the greater reporting of incidents of social unrest during the 2000s was caused by commercial publications vying for readership in a competitive marketplace, and point towards emergent Internet communication technologies, principally blogging and microblogging, as an important source for mainstream journalists which limit what propaganda authorities are able to control.

Lee (2010) is one of the few to actually examine the media output arising from a protest event – the Dingzhou protest in the northern province of Hebei in 2005 – but her discussion is extremely brief. Though Zheng (2011) does not examine media coverage of social protest in a systematic way, she makes an argument around the widespread use of the term 'mass incidents', both inside and outside China. She claims the discursive agglomeration of what are multifarious issues and problems under the term "mass incidents" only serves to strengthen the Party-state. Describing,

lobbying attempts made through the Xinfang system as there are formal legal complaints (Minzer, 2006: 106) but that only 0.2% of complainants succeed in having their issues addressed.

for example, 'rights movements', 'anger venting incidents', or 'expression of public interest', under the same banner is problematic, she argues.

One of the most important trends in the scholarship of protest in China is the focus on the extent to which Internet and telecoms technologies are involved in both fomenting protest and spreading information about protest. The Internet will be treated more fully in the next section. Hung (2013) uses a case study of the Xiamen PX protest – to be discussed later in this thesis – to explain how “individualistic participatory media” made by amateurs effectively challenges “official” media coverage. She argues that a new style of citizen activism, enabled by new information communication technologies (ICTs), is holding power to account, and is expanding scope for public debate. ICTs lead to more distributed power, she argues, and have fostered an increased sense of civic engagement. However, predictably, she finds strong push back from the state. Hung (2010), too, examines the Internet in her discussion of modern *wei-quan* movements, suggesting that Internet platforms offer protestors greater scope to make claims on the state.

Working within the 'adaptive authoritarian' framework, Hassid (2012) argues that mainstream media coverage may intersect with online protest events to provide a social safety valve for issues of potential political sensitivity. This works best, he argues, when mainstream media sets and steers the news agenda. In such instances, Internet debate may allow emotion to dissipate but is neutered, in terms of its political threat, thanks to the 'guidance of public opinion' at the level of mainstream media – a concept which will be returned to in the press section of this chapter. Though these ideas are critical in guiding this research project, Hassid's study makes online protest its focus, with the mainstream media drawn in only as a dependent variable.

Protest and the Anglophone media

Though the mediation of protest has not been studied meaningfully in the mainland Chinese context, there is a substantial body of literature on the subject in Anglophone circles (Gitlin, 1980; Chan & Lee, 1984; McLeod & Hertog, 1998). The assumptions at the heart of these studies chime with the theoretical framework used in this thesis (see Chapter 4). They are threefold: one, that mainstream media has considerable

power to set agendas and confer legitimacy; two, that media representations, or ‘frames’, are critical in influencing how the public understands protestor claims and, therefore, whether those claims should be supported; and, three – logically flowing from these assumptions – that protestors must, to some extent, rely on mainstream media to reach those political actors who have the power to effect the change demanded. Contradicting liberal assumptions of media as a neutral public sphere ‘resource’³⁵, scholars working within the Anglophone context have consistently found that media coverage serves to undermine protest movements.

The seminal work in this canon is Gitlin’s study (1980) of the experiences of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Gitlin explores how the mainstream media’s 1965 ‘discovery’ of the SDS – an anti-Vietnam War, free speech movement – was at once a breakthrough *and* a disaster for the group. It went from being an association which worked almost exclusively through interpersonal interactions, to one which engaged, with varying degrees of reluctance, with organisations like CBS and the *New York Times* – the twin empirical foci of Gitlin’s analysis – in an attempt to control how it was portrayed to mass audiences. SDS’s appearances in national media outlets did indeed lend the organisation new power to proliferate its ideas but ultimately exerted deleterious effects. The “making and the unmaking” (Gitlin, 1980) of the SDS was complex but at the heart of the process was the organisation’s inability to control its mass media representation and overcome the media ‘codes’ that required celebrity, spectacle and drama.

Building on this work, Chan and Lee identify the existence of a ‘protest paradigm’ (1984). This refers to the tendency of media organisations to follow a set routine in covering protest events, one which works to trivialise, marginalise and undermine the protest action by manipulating how the protest is presented through narrative structures, or ‘frames’ (Harlow & Johnson, 2011). Among the elements identified are: a focus on the violent and disruptive aspects of protestors’ behaviour; the use of a crime news discourse to describe protestors’ actions; a tendency to emphasise protestors’ strange or deviant appearances; asserting the ineffectiveness of a protest action; a prioritisation of theatrical elements over substantive issues; soliciting quotes

³⁵ For more on the concept of the public sphere, see page 80.

from ‘members of the public’ who condemn protest action; and an over-reliance on elite government sources in narrating, explaining or condemning protest actions (McLeod & Hertog, 1998). These specific textual techniques are the result of three methods of control at the level of news production: newsroom management, routinization, and unchallenged journalistic norms (Lee, 2014). The cumulative effect is to obfuscate the issues which underlie protest, and to delegitimise protesters by portraying their actions as deviant, threatening or impotent.

Such views, generally expounded by theorists from a critical tradition³⁶, posit mainstream media as an agent of social control, a modern equivalent to the medieval church, or a supportive sibling to society’s legal and educational frameworks. Because media is embedded within the larger political-economic structures of society, it tends to work to reinforce existing norms and uphold dominant institutions. There is thus some overlap with this study of the press in the Chinese context, where to ascribe such a functionalist role to media³⁷ does not require a ‘critical’ theoretical framework but only an acceptance of Chinese media’s self-proclaimed propaganda model, discussed earlier in this chapter.

Older studies have been updated in light of technological and social developments to recognise that there is now a wider diversity of representations of protest and a greater complexity in approach by mainstream media organisations (Cottle & Lester, 2011; Lee, 2014). Part of the explanation is that protest has become increasingly normalised within Anglophone societies (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). More groups than ever before are engaged in activism of various kinds on a wide range of issues, leading to a “cacophonous field of contemporary protests” (Cottle, 2008: 857). This has made the mainstream media response less predictable than it once was.

Internet platforms, in particular, have appeared to provide activists and protestors with tools to circumvent traditional media gatekeeping, control messages and independently construct networks, and audiences – a process termed ‘organic reach’ within the sphere of digital marketing (Campbell, 2015). Indeed, the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ social movements of 2011 were widely, and probably erroneously, attributed

³⁶ The author refers to the term ‘critical’ in the neo-Marxist sense, as in ‘critical theory’.

³⁷ For more on press functionalism, see page 107.

to the democratising influence of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. They prompted an excited response in some scholarly quarters, with the suggestion being that the protest paradigm may have been 'overthrown' (Harlow & Johnson, 2011). However, such techno-utopianism should be tempered by contemporary understandings around the non-neutrality of Internet platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. This is to say, power has not moved *away from* mainstream 'legacy' media companies and *towards* the people. Rather, a different set of media companies have seized gatekeeping power. These companies, driven by the need to produce profit, retain the means and the motivation to deny individuals, companies or activists the 'organic reach' they desire, especially when user activities conflict with their own goals (Campbell, 2015). Though these goals are more likely to be commercial than political, they may be seen as operating within the same wider political-economic structure that has been alluded to already in this section.

Summary

To return to the subject of protest in the Chinese context, we have seen that social upheaval does not, in and of itself, imply an existential threat to central leadership. Within Chinese political history, protest has long been locally constituted. Moreover, each protest genre – be it nationalist protest, tax protest, religious protest, ethnic protest, class protest – has specific historic resonance which may make one particular protest more, or less, sensitive than another (Perry, 2001). However, the representation of protests is crucial in assessing their overall potential threat and benefit. Though protest is increasing in the current era of social and economic transformation, it remains a sensitive subject as the legitimacy of the central authority's legitimacy is very much staked on ensuring economic development for all and internal harmony during a period of enormous social flux. Managing this process involves China's propaganda system, as well as close attention to the work of mainstream media and debate on online social media. However, hitherto, and unlike in the Anglophone media realm, there has not been any concerted effort to examine the place of the media in contemporary Chinese protest movements.

The Chinese Internet

Introduction

The precise role of the World Wide Web – or ‘Internet’ – in the myriad social, economic and political transformations of the last 20 years is a topic that has inspired much academic debate and contention. What is uncontentious is that the Internet has changed many of the *methods* of social and economic interactions, with the lingering possibility that it may also have changed, more profoundly, the nature of those interactions.

In China, the arrival of this epoch-defining technology has coincided with a broader historic transformation that may be characterised as a move away from a closed, centrally-planned socio-political system towards an increasingly open and devolved socio-political system. Tim Berners-Lee ‘invented’ the Internet in late 1990, just over a year before Deng Xiaoping’s ‘Southern Tour’ in early 1992³⁸. These sparks of inspiration occurred in absolute isolation of one another, but their respective impacts on the PRC have unfurled in parallel. Today, these two stories are very obviously intertwined, with the Internet a crucial element – albeit one of many – in the broader process of economic, social and political change in modern China.

One sphere where this is particularly obvious is media and communications. In the same way that many liberal political theorists assumed – so-far erroneously – that the onset of free-market economics would necessarily drive fundamental political reform in China, it was widely assumed that the Internet would bring China’s historic system of information control crashing down. From the perspective of the mid-1990s, it was inconceivable that there could be a fully ‘wired’ China in which the Communist Party comfortably wielded power; in the oft-cited words of former US President Bill Clinton, censoring the Internet was like trying to “nail Jell-O³⁹ to the wall”. However, the ostensible pathway from ‘repression’ to ‘freedom’ never revealed itself and the CCP has seemingly proved adept at integrating these two exemplars of US-Anglo innovation – consumer capitalism and the Internet – within a Sino-Soviet political

³⁸ See footnote on page 47.

³⁹ ‘Jell-O’ is a popular US brand name of the viscous dessert food known generically as ‘jelly’ in British English.

system. Nearly 20 years on from the first China ISP registration in 1996, the CCP remains in power and the internet remains a well-regulated sphere.

However, public debate in China has been transformed over the last 20 years, with the Internet an obvious component in this change. “The participatory and interactive qualities of the Internet, its less easily controlled nature...along with the state’s deliberate strategy of allowing more leeway in online communication, have enabled the Internet public to significantly broaden the terms of political discourse in China” (Zhao, 2012: 160). The specific online vehicles for this transformation have changed over the years, beginning with personal websites and evolving through Bulletin Boards, blogs, microblogs, to highly social text and voice message platforms, Weixin⁴⁰ being the most notable current example. The discourse which has flowed through these channels includes issues of social contention but, importantly for the purposes of the current discussion, one must assert that internet contention does not *replace* street protest, but rather complements it (Yang, 2009).

The Chinese Web in Historical Context

From academic beginnings in the mid-1990s, the Internet was identified by central planners as a vehicle for the ‘informationisation’ of Chinese society and thus a potential driver of economic growth (Hu, 2011). There appears to have been early indications that central leadership recognised the Internet’s potential political threat as well as its economic potential. Central government demonstrated its willingness to monitor online discussion as early as 1996, when forums expressing overly nationalistic sentiments were taken down during a dispute over the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands⁴¹. There was similar intervention when nationalist sentiment flared again in 1998 over the killing of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia and in 1999 with the ‘accidental’ bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (Bishop, 2014).

⁴⁰ Weixin is known as WeChat in English.

⁴¹ These islands are known as the Diaoyu Dao in Mandarin Chinese. The latest furore over the islands flared in September 2012 after the islands were essentially nationalised. At the time of writing, tensions remain high, with both China and Japan routinely sending jet aircraft and sea vessels to patrol islands which both sides contend are rightly theirs.

Given the obvious potential for disruption to the communications landscape, central authorities were keen to remain in ultimate control of the development of web infrastructure. As with a raft of other industrial sectors deemed to be 'core' to Chinese national interests, the CCP kept out Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from the telecom infrastructure (Wu, 2010; Zhao, 2008). The same rule applies to media companies but, despite Internet firms being increasingly engaged in media practices, the major Chinese companies which emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s invariably had a substantial element of foreign involvement. Sina, for example, began life as Sinanet.com, a Californian website company and only took off after merging with Taiwanese company, Stone Rich Sight (SRS) Information Technology. Sohu, likewise, was launched with US venture capital (Bishop, 2014; Clark, 2014).

These ostensibly 'domestic' Chinese companies – Sohu, Sina, and Netease foremost amongst them – have come to dominate the Chinese web and have been instrumental in leading technological innovation. Fierce market-driven competition exists between privately-financed domestic industries, but the competitive fight unfolds within boundaries determined by the Party and with profits dependent on the acquiescence of national politicians who are able to give, or withdraw, licences. It's a remote, proxy form of control which is not entirely water-tight but which has, hitherto, worked very successfully.

There is now more than a decade of evidence proving the Chinese leadership's commitment to technological openness. Though in the Party-state's opaque patchwork of ministries and competing interests (MacKinnon, 2010) there may be claims on control, there seems little doubt that when a new technology comes into being, it will be embraced in China. Indeed, there has been a drive to put Chinese organisations at the vanguard of technological innovation. The 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-15) has put stress on major national programs to promote industrial innovation in areas, such as China Next Generation Internet, network of things, and broadband wireless Internet (Hu, 2011). Where the Internet was central to propelling economic growth in the early part of the last decade, it is now deemed imperative to *transforming* that model away from the sale of cheap manufactured goods towards higher level services. Chinese telecoms companies such as ZTE and Huawei have

emerged as business rivals to established telecoms companies of the West and operate globally. As of 2012, Huawei represented a \$32-billion business empire and had 140,000 employees with customers in 140 countries (Economist, 2012b)

Scale and Reach

According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), there were just two million Internet users (out of a population of 1.3 billion) in 1998. This figure had risen to 22.5 million by 2000 and 100 million by 2005. In 2008 China replaced the United States as the country with the highest number of Internet users in the world. By the end of 2013, 618 million people in China had access to the web (CNNIC, 2014).

This precipitous rise has gone in tandem with the spread of other telecommunication technologies. In 1997, there were 70 million fixed-line telephones and 13 million mobiles (annual data reported by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, quoted in Liang & Lu, 2010). In 2001 China surpassed the United States to become the world's largest mobile telecom market and its total number of mobile phone users reached nearly 373 million by 2005 while the number of fixed-line telephone reached 342 million (Tai, 2006: 119, quoted in Liang & Lu, 2010). The CNNIC's 2014 survey suggested that 500 million accessed the web using mobile technology during the previous year (CNNIC, 2014). Indeed, for the majority of modern users, the need for physical cable connections has ceased to exist, reducing the inequalities in access that characterised the early stage of internet adoption (Hu, 2011).

The Chinese Internet as a Space 'Apart'

There has been considerable scholarly investigation of media convergence (Meikle & Young, 2011; Quinn, 2005). This work tends to focus on both industrial aspects – how *media companies* have exploited new digital technologies – as well as consumer aspects – how *individuals* are using new technologies to create, consume and interact with established media. Importantly, many of the trends and tendencies displayed by web development in the Anglosphere have failed to materialise in the Chinese context, specifically in terms of industrial conglomeration. There is manifestly *not* the same level of convergence between traditional media and online.

The explanations for this are political rather than technological. When there have been efforts to engender convergent media – the success of the Hunan TV programme *Super Girl* in the mid-2000s being a prime example – political interference soon follows. Thus the Internet in China exists in a more easily defined space *separate* from traditional media. This has led, Clark claims, to a failure by official media to innovate (2014) and a disconnect between young people and traditional media sources. Bishop argues that the lack of trust exhibited by young Chinese towards traditional media mean most engage *exclusively* with Internet-based media. Though Internet usage is higher amongst the young in every country in the world, the Anglophone media sphere is not quite so starkly divided (Bishop, 2014).

Ways of looking at the internet in China

The impact of the Chinese Internet has stirred much academic interest since the turn of the millennium. There appears a divide in the nature of the enquiry between Western and Chinese academic circles. The first iteration of the ‘China web’ discourse in the West saw researchers discuss the web’s liberating potential in the repressive Chinese context. In this frame of analysis, the internet is seen in terms of its potential as a democratizing force. Internet users are conceptualised as ordinary members of society who are able to apply pressure on the state and, in the process, peel back authoritarianism. This may be described as the ‘liberation discourse’.

The apparent failure of web take-up to spur political change in China led to a mutation of this discourse, one in which the web is seen as having been captured by the State. Under such a perspective, the Internet becomes a potential means of surveillance and a site of repression. The discourse remains preoccupied with democratization and political change, but argues for the Internet as a means of pre-empting political change. This may be described as the ‘authoritarian adaptation discourse’.

The predominant Chinese discourse, in contrast, posits the Internet as a tool for modernization, with enquiries focusing on how this can be best enacted. In addition to its obvious function in economic development, the Internet becomes a potential tool for incorporating backward regions and neglected groups in China’s future

prosperity. This may be described as the ‘developmental discourse’ (Damm, 2009; Jiang, 2010).

These three strands closely echo the nature of the enquiry surrounding protest, discussed in the last section. The first two discourses are at either end of a singular and highly politicized paradigm, one perceiving nascent democratisation, the second explaining why authoritarianism remains prevalent. The third paradigm is an attempt to peer into cultural specificities which introduce further dimensions into the frame and provide greater nuance.

The Liberation Discourse

The liberation discourse may be seen as an outgrowth of Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’ thesis (1992), discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. In summary, it proposes that the Internet provides an irresistible counterweight to Party control of public discourse which, in turn, is existentially threatening to a regime which relies on strict control of information flows.

That China’s earliest and most enduring forum for online information exchange – the Bulletin Board System (BBS)⁴² – took root within student communities in the 1990s (Clark, 2014) is significant in explaining why many saw, and still see, the Internet as a threat for authoritarian regime (Rawnsley, 2007; Yang, 2009; Esarey & Qiang, 2011). Students occupy a privileged place in the pantheon of 20th century protest in China⁴³. Though the student-led reform movement of 1989 was crushed, a feeling has persisted that political challenge would most likely emerge from the nation’s campuses.

The first evolution of the BBS format came in the form of the static blog⁴⁴ and, later, the aping of the social networking sites that emerged from the Anglophone web in

⁴² Bulletin board communication revolves around ‘discussion threads’, long streams of linked comments which ostensibly discuss a specific topic but, often, digress into unanticipated areas. Users are usually required to sign up to the bulletin board before they are able to contribute and comments are often moderated before they appear.

⁴³ Students were on the front line of the May 4th Movement in 1919, the Cultural Revolution in the 1966-76 period, and the protests of the 1980s, particularly those in 1986 and, most famously, 1989 (Wasserstrom, 1991).

⁴⁴ Blogs first gained national attention in 2003 when a Guangzhou blogger working under the pen-name Mu Zimei, began chronicling her sexual encounters in her online diary. They took off in terms of

the second half of the 2000s – Facebook and Twitter foremost among them. These began to allow individuals the means to broadcast multimedia content, an innovation which took place alongside the rise of the smartphone, complete with cameras to record images and video. Chan sums the libertarian optimism associated with this evolution:

...every mobile handset and computer is a news broadcast station, a node in a vast information network....information can now pass easily across national boundaries, both tangible and intangible, and reach millions of people. (2010)

Throughout 2010, the first full year of Sina Weibo's operation, the microblog's news potency became apparent through a number of extremely high-profile stories which garnered huge interest online and attracted mainstream press coverage. The self-immolation of three people protesting against forced demolition in Jiangxi province was one such example. Other notable cases include the 'Li Gang incident' in Hubei⁴⁵, the Li Mengmeng case in Henan⁴⁶, and the death of village leader, Qian Yunhui. All three cases stirred online public opinion and appeared to force local Party officials into defensive positions.

The relative decentralization of government supervision, the scale and viral possibilities of online content, and the greater number of non-state actors have combined to make it difficult for the Chinese state to control the dissemination of such episodes (Wang, 2010). Internet-enabled communication technologies appear good examples of what Latham defines as 'disorderly' media. Where 'orderly' media carries assumptions of verticality, durable media effects, and a 'propaganda model' of communication, disorderly media manifests no such verticality, durability or politicization (Latham, 2009). Yang agrees that it is the horizontality of Internet technologies that marks them out as 'regime threatening'. The power of the Internet

user numbers in 2005 when major blog platforms such as Blogchina and Sina's blog service were launched (Chi, 2006).

⁴⁵In which a drunk driver knocked over and killed a student on a campus pavement and later appeared to mock those who tried to apprehend him, presuming legal immunity on the basis that his father was Li Gang, a senior local police officer.

⁴⁶Which involved a high school student being refused entry to university, despite outstanding scores, on the basis that a school administrator absent-mindedly left her academic record in a drawer.

lies within its 'networked' potential (2006, 2008), and ability to bring together disparate elements, previously fragmented.

Since the so-called 'Big-V' crackdown which attempted to rein in opinion leaders on Weibo in 2013⁴⁷, the Chinese social network which has gained most in popularity is Tencent's Weixin⁴⁸. WeChat, to give it its English title, allows users to leave voice messages for connected individuals or networks of followers which may be supplemented with multimedia content. As of early 2014, Weixin had 270 million active users (Economist, 2014a) but, significantly, it is used primarily for private chatting and photo sharing and is not universally searchable as were its predecessors. Nevertheless, it has facilitated rapid, diffuse and highly networked discussion.

A Networked Public Sphere?

The speed, scope and public nature of public communications, combined with developments in mobile technology, not least the advent of high quality camera phones and near total internet coverage, has energized civil society, encouraging engagement with politics and applying pressure on the authoritarian Party-state (Yang, 2009). This in turn has prompted widespread discussion of the notion of a Chinese web-based 'public sphere'.

The notion of a public sphere imagines a space *between* individuals and the state which provides an opportunity for individuals and civil groups to transmit and discuss information and ideas. It links civil society – associations of individuals forming social bonds independent of the state – at the base, and the state sphere – political institutions – at the top of society, and connects them in such a way that allows the interaction between the two so that politics is not merely *done* to a society, but where individuals and groups can connect, work through political debates and discussion and, in doing so, participate in the effective functioning of society. It thus supposes the existence of civil society and a singular, coherent state.

⁴⁷ This has been colloquially dubbed the 'Big-V crackdown'. Big-Vs are those microblog users who have 'verified' (V) celebrity status and who broadcast to often millions of followers. In 2013 several of the biggest users were caught in vice raids and broadcast confessing to crimes on state television. For more on Weibo's apparent demise, see Moore (2014) and New York Times (2014).

⁴⁸ Like RenRen (Facebook) and Weibo (Twitter), Weixin (WeChat in English) is a sophisticated reworking of an idea first developed in Silicon Valley. It is modelled on WhatsApp, a start-up which was purchased by Facebook in 2014.

Because the concept of a public sphere is associated with democratic association, it ostensibly stands at odds with authoritarian systems. At the base, many have denied China has a civil society thanks to pervasive state interference in social formations which are generally private in the Western context, and the strategic denial of attempts to form non-state associations in arenas such as organised labour and religion. Likewise, at the centre, the Chinese media, mainstream and social media, is subject to state control. However, concepts of the public sphere also assume openness and diversity, and oppose visions of a mass society. In this context, discussion of the Chinese public sphere, or spheres, appears more worthwhile as virtually all scholars agree that China has become, in many respects, a highly pluralistic society, one in which the State has deliberately withdrawn from interference at the grassroots.

The classical Habermasian definition of a public sphere is that of a “society engaged in critical public debate” (1989: 52). Habermas identified 18th century European coffee shops as the primary vehicle for the rise of what he termed a ‘bourgeois’ public sphere. This was one in which political participants – likely social elites such as merchants and politicians of various hues – engaged in private face-to-face conversations, organised public debates or distributed pamphlets around various political issues. Assuming Enlightenment rationality and Darwinian sense of natural selection, the Habermasian conception of the ideal public sphere is one where consensus forms from manifold individual voices after they have been subject to question and challenge. This distilled and robust opinion may then inform the work of the State. Thus the ideal public sphere is democratic in that it mediated *between* state and society.

Habermas set us this ‘ideal’ vision to help explain the deleterious effects of mass commercial media which he saw as turning an ‘active’ public into an audience of ‘passive’ consumers. The propaganda model of the Chinese press, discussed in Chapter 3, supposes the same passivity of Chinese audiences. However, the rise of public media – media produced by, and broadcast by, individuals – fundamentally challenges this idea.

Writing at the end of the 1990s, Lynch saw in China evidence of ideological collapse and a fundamental weakening in the Party-state's control of communicative flows. From this, he conceptualised a chaotic, unguided "praetorian public sphere" emerging. The term 'praetorian' is taken from Samuel Huntingdon's definition of a 'praetorian society' as one which is "roiled by extensive and intensive political participation that isn't channelled effectively through institutions" (Lynch, 2010). This produces a chaotic discursive space in which no one institution, or indeed Party, can impose order. Though the work was written during the Internet's infancy in China, Lynch cites technological advances as one of three core explanations for the Party's loss of control⁴⁹ and he envisages the Internet as being an almost insurmountable obstacle to the maintenance of control in China (Lynch, 1999).

This resonates strongly with much of the discussion around the rise of social media in China. However, others have argued for a more nuanced vision of the Internet-as-public-sphere in China. In particular, they point to the importance of mainstream media in public opinion formation.

Reflecting somewhat Lynch's fragmented praetorian public sphere, Zhao describes a "cacophony of contending public spheres" (2008: 325) which, while including some individual voices from the intellectual elite and bloggers, mainly consist of media platforms – commercial dailies, party organs, and the business press. Zhan (2013) suggests China has a "primitive" civil society which is exclusively media based. Though association is denied at the institutional level, he argues the media provides an opportunity for both economic actors and social actors, such as individuals and non-governmental groups, to engage in politics. He describes this as "media-driven public participation" (ibid) and emphasises the manner in which the media can transcend the natural fault lines that run across local, regional and national divides within the Party-state, and allow certain specific incidents to become national public events.

Chu, likewise, argues for the emergence of a de-facto democratically-operating public sphere, identifying new television formats as the primary vehicle. She points, in particular, to a new breed of TV format which took root in the early 2000s. These involve members of the public debating issues of political significance. She also

⁴⁹ The other two are administrative fragmentation and property rights reform.

argues that TV documentaries allow for what she terms “polyphonic heterogeneity”, that is the coexistence of varied individual voices within the media, albeit ones which are reported from the perspective of “individual reality”, or “individual truthfulness”. Allied with the opening of a gap between political ideology and commercial interests, and the willingness of journalists to engage in limited civic activism, these developments constitute an emergent public sphere and an important space for discursive behaviour (Chu, 2007).

Lagerkvist argues that China’s internet politics constitutes a “force field” in which different social forces and political interests compete over norms and values. He recognises this space is able to be controlled by the Party-state to a much greater extent than Lynch thought possible, but nevertheless suggests that the “Party-state is severely challenged by an online environment in which young Chinese are forming their own norms on the issue of control and freedom in society” (2010: 15). These, in turn, have the potential to inform elite debate, both within closed Party politics and within the more part-controlled mainstream media sphere.

The Authoritarian Adaptation Discourse

Lagerkvist represents the blending of the liberation discourse, with its belief in the public sphere potential of the web, with its ostensible antithesis, the authoritarian adaptation discourse, which sees new possibilities for disempowerment and control. Like Lynch, Lagerkvist recognises the challenge posed by the emergence of a Web-based public sphere, but argues it is contained within a highly stable, ostensibly quiescent political system producing what he terms a “locked in public sphere” (2010)⁵⁰. Debate exists but cannot find genuine public expression and, as such, a ‘public sphere’ cannot form, as public opinion has no means to coalesce. The mainstream media is particularly important, he claims, as it could potentially “unlock” the Chinese public sphere (2010: 24). However, he suggests the issue is not merely one of “challenge-response” between the Party and social actors. Rather, Lagerkvist suggests that the process is embedded as the government is able to control the development of both mainstream media and the Internet, and, moreover, is a force

⁵⁰ Here, Lagerkvist conceives the body politic in physical terms and borrows the language of medical discourse, referencing the medical syndrome in which a patient is conscious and cognitively healthy but lacks the means to express himself properly.

within society itself. Change may occur thanks to new “norms” and “expectations” engendered by the Internet but the Chinese state and society are “mutually embedded” (2011: 267).

In a major updating of the Habermasian notion of the ‘public sphere’ – and a concept that is particularly relevant to China – DeLuca and Peebles have argued that their concept of the ‘public screen’ is a “necessary supplement” (2002: 125) to notions of the public sphere. Their starting point is the observation that notions of the rational, consensus-seeking public sphere are outdated when one considers the modern “televisual world characterised by image and spectacle” (2002: 129). The format of information delivery – the frame of a television or computer screen⁵¹ - must be brought into the analytical fold. Thus, where the public spheres presupposes rational debate, consensus and a modicum of civility, the public screen foregrounds “dissemination, images, hypermediacy, publicity, distraction, and dissent” (DeLuca and Peebles, 2002: 125). Importantly, in contrast to a public sphere which privileges embodied voices – an exchange, normally in the form of dialogue, between individuals – the public screen allows for the “scattering of emissions without the guarantee of productive exchanges” (2002: 130-131).

A public sphere thus filtered through an image-dominated, rancorous, fast-changing public screen may be antithetical to the smooth functioning of public opinion formation. Lu Xun, the grandfather of literary modernism in China, first introduced the term *kanke wenhua* nearly a century ago, identifying a ‘culture of gazing’. This referred to the phenomenon of people drawn to scenes of tragedy but staring on with a numb indifference rather than helping. Such scenes are still common in China⁵². The updated term for the Internet age is *weiguan*, the “surrounding gaze” which encourages passive and fleeting interest in sensational or salacious subjects. Echoing

⁵¹ Though they were writing in the pre-iPad, pre-smartphone era, DeLuca and Peebles’ notion of the public screen may easily be extended to mobile phone screens and tablet devices.

⁵² The author can recall seeing several examples of this during his five years living in mainland China between 2003 and 2008.

criticisms of *slacktivism*⁵³ in the Western context, such engagement has the effect of diminishing public debate as it turns debate into spectacle⁵⁴.

Censorship Practices

Deibert has pointed out that “[j]ust as the domains of land, sea, air, and space have all been gradually colonized, militarized, and subject to inter-state competition so too [has] the once relatively unencumbered domain of cyberspace”(2009: 334). In China, this is manifest in terms of the strategic attempt to bound web interactions within what some have called a ‘national intranet’, thereby retaining control of infrastructure, as well as the companies which provide the software platforms on which interactions take place. As Lagerkvist notes, the Internet has not evolved as a sphere *apart* from politics, but rather a sphere *within*. Changes to the administrative arrangements for Internet control made in 2014⁵⁵ are testament to the Party’s concern that while the Internet clearly challenges assumptions of absolute political control, it remains determined to ensure it develops *within* the ambit of political oversight (Epstein, 2013).

The chief plank of this strategic enterprise has been for the CCP to keep major ‘Western’ web companies at arms’ length – permitting only conditional access to China and, on occasion, blocking sites completely – while encouraging the development of domestic versions of all of the major web technologies (ibid). The benefits of such an arrangement are dispersed among the constituent parties, it is argued. On the one hand, the majority of Chinese web users are happy to be served by domestic companies who better understand their specific needs, culture and language; for the web companies themselves, they have been allowed to thrive in something of a walled garden, protected from competitive attacks from the international behemoths of the web industry. The payback for China’s political class is

⁵³ A good example is the portrayal of two young migrant workers in the 2013 Jia Zhangke film *A Touch Of Sin* who delight in going online and seeking salacious or sensational news but can only think to respond to each of the sorry tales they hear with the phrase, ‘WTF’, or ‘What the Fuck’.

⁵⁴ For the counter argument, see Hu (2011) who regards *weiguan* as progressive force which, even regardless of the passivity of the observers, has the effect of applying pressure to the authoritarian state.

⁵⁵ Under these, Xi Jinping, the Chinese President and CCP General Secretary, personally took charge of the newly created Central Internet Security and Informatization Leading Group. Premier Li Keqiang is also a member. A Xinhua news story from the first meeting of this group in 2014 quotes the President as saying “Cyberspace should be made clean and chipper”.

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-02/27/c_133148273.htm

that these web companies are subject to domestic rules and regulations and, as such, are enlisted in the ongoing battle to police the web. China's censorship regime relies "on domestic companies to police their own content under penalty of fines, shutdown and criminal liability" (Opennet.net, 2009, quoted by Bamman et al, 2012⁵⁶). "When the head of Bokee.com, China's largest blog host, was asked to explain why his company voluntarily screened out 'offensive' subject matter, he responded in terms of narrow corporate expediency: 'We are a commercial company... We have a responsibility to our shareholders... If we allow anyone to publish sensitive content, the whole site will be blocked'" (Baum, 2008: 171).

It has become clear that, where 'hard' censorship – prevention of access with a catch-all IP block – has been implemented beyond China's web jurisdiction, the Chinese government has preferred to allow domestic sites to flourish while managing content through a process of regulation and self-regulation. In 2011, Charles Chao, Sina's CEO, claimed that around 100 people are employed as censors (Bamman et al, 2012), though others have claimed that this number likely runs into the thousands (Sullivan, 2012: 776). Whatever the number of Sina staff monitors, they have a "real headache" (Sullivan, 2012) in ensuring a politically-palatable online environment on account of the sheer number of top-down requests. Qiang reports speaking to a senior manager at 'one of China's largest Internet portals' who "acknowledged receiving instructions from either the SCIO or other provincial-level propaganda officials at least three times a day" (Qiang, 2011: 207).

There is also the considerable problem of the protean nature of sensitive topics and keywords. One list exists for settled and fixed sensitivities (i.e. Falun Gong [*falun gong*], 6.4 [*liu si*]) but another responds almost constantly to the changing and dynamic sensitivities of the day (Knockel et al, 2011). Counter-intuitively, it is not a list that is necessarily handed down by the government. As Mackinnon notes:

...rewards and punishments are meted out based on the extent to which Internet companies successfully prevent groundswells of public

⁵⁶ For more on the mechanics of Chinese Internet censorship, see Crandall & Wallach, 2013; Zhu et al, 2013; Mackinnon, 2009 and Chen & Ang, 2011.

conversation around politically inflammatory topics that might inspire a critical mass on people to challenge Communist Party authority.” (2009)

Accordingly, Internet administrators may well take it upon themselves to delete posts or side-line a debate if they perceive in it potential risk. This goes a long way to explaining the fact that studies have discovered great variance between censorship practices of different web administrators (Mackinnon, 2009; Bamman et al, 2012).

Though web post deletion takes place at the level of the website administrator, there is evidence of complicity between both State and commercial interests, with one (subsequently deleted) *Caixin* report in early 2013 investigating the practices of professional post deletion companies. One such company, Yaga Times, was claimed to have taken upwards of 50 million RMB in 2011 as payment for securing the deletion of posts from both private companies seeking to protect their reputation and government officials keen on massaging their online profile (Fei Chang Dao, 2013).

The specific response to postings which reference these problematic issues is varied. Broadly speaking, three main tactics are employed. Users may be blocked from uploading a post on the basis of a detected sensitive keyword; secondly, posts that are made may be retroactively deleted⁵⁷; finally, search functions may be blocked. This has the effect of blocking the vast majority of sensitive content from view for the vast majority of users, but does not involve specific posts being taken down (greatfire.org, 2013).

There are two further, more general strategies employed to control the microblog space, neither of which involves active ‘censorship’. One is to promote depoliticised and non-controversial topics (this is discussed in more detail in the next chapter in relation to the press). The other, less well documented, strategy is the use of paid commentators to influence sensitive online debate. Bandurski (2008) has drawn attention to the so-called ‘50-cent party’ (*wu mao dang*), ostensibly ordinary users who are on retainers to articulate ‘the official’ point of view in any given political debate. In a similar vein, the Internet Water Army (*wangluo shuijun*) has been used to

⁵⁷ With the additional possibility that an entire user account could be deleted. This has happened to a number of high-profile online commentators, including Isaac Mao and Murong Xuecun (Magistad, 2012).

refer to group of individuals who are hired to flood forums with comments (Yu et al, 2012)). Such workers may not necessarily be cleaving to political diktat. Some nationalistic Netizens have called themselves ‘voluntary five mao’ workers (Offbeat China, 2014).

The overall result is that, while the Chinese web allows citizens to express themselves with unprecedented latitude, censorship mechanisms have been continually developed and refined over time to the point that the Party-state can be fairly confident about stymying discussion of undesirable topics. More importantly, some have theorised that this kind of *bounded* discussion may actually improve the government’s surveillance capabilities (Hung, 2010). Ferguson has suggested that the Internet provides China’s rulers with an invaluable method of applying Lockean theories of governance⁵⁸. The greatest benefit of free flowing online discourse, he argues, is that it allows the political elite to bypass China's sycophantic bureaucracy in its effort to sample public opinion among the relatively affluent, middle class users of online platforms (2012). The Chinese Internet, thus, creates a diverse but neutered ‘civil society’ which can be controlled and manipulated almost as easily as the ‘totalitarian society’ it replaced (Brady, 2010).

The non-political web – development and identity politics

While online activism and political discussion commands the attention of a great many scholars, the vast majority of Chinese web activity and online communications are dissociated from politics. As has been discussed, some have seen a political conspiracy in this – “state propaganda as ideotainment” as Lagerkvist puts it (2010: 262). However, others suggest, more straightforwardly, that politics and activism are highly niche interests and that the space is better characterised as one of consumption, commerce and identity politics (Mengin, 2004; Herold & Marolt, 2011).

⁵⁸ Crudely put, Lockean political theory emphasises the importance of the approval of the property-owning middle classes in any given polity.

One survey⁵⁹ from 2010 suggests young Chinese spend more time using all but one of the key internet technologies tested compared to citizens of any other major developed or developing nation. The vast majority of the Chinese energetic, active and social (Sullivan, 2012) Netizen class are chiefly concerned with gaining access to news, games, shopping and chat. Statistics from a real-time survey of Sina Weibo users in Hong Kong are indicative of the prevailing culture online. Of all the ‘tweets’ sampled in a single day, those that referenced or discussed celebrities outweighed any other by a considerable margin⁶⁰.

The Internet has an explicit role within central government economic planning for economic growth. This was suggested in the 9th Five-Year Plan (1996-2000), made explicit in the 10th Five-Year Plan (2001-2005) which remarked that the Internet could “drive industrialization through informatization” (Xue, 2005). The emphasis has only strengthened in the years since (Hong, 2011). Companies such as Lenovo, ZTE and Huawei, may be said to be the product of this strategy. They currently enjoy global market share in products which facilitate Internet access, either at the level of core infrastructure or for the end-consumer in the form of laptops, tablets and smartphones. In terms of the programmes and applications which operate on those devices, some of China’s most successful domestic Internet companies – Ctrip⁶¹, Alibaba⁶² and Sina – produce such huge profits at home that they have successfully listed on New York City’s Nasdaq stock exchange and have attracted considerable overseas investment, despite the fact that this investment is indirect and unprotected by US law (Bishop, 2014)⁶³.

Summary

Discussion of the place of the Internet in Chinese political life follows a similar path to that of protest, discussed above. It ostensibly represents a grave threat to the

⁵⁹ http://www.accenture.com/Global/Research_and_Insights/By_Role/HighPerformance_IT/CIOResearch/Jumping-Boundaries.htm

⁶⁰ <http://jmsc.hku.hk/blogs/ricecooker/2010/12/13/did-i-really-need-a-microblog-aggregator-to-figure-this-out/>

⁶¹ Ctrip is an online travel agent, offering flight, hotel and train bookings. Though it has real-world offices and a large number of customer-facing staff, its chief business is done online.

⁶² Alibaba is China’s largest online retailer and has several websites facilitating online shopping, notably Taobao and Tmall.

⁶³ For more on this, see discussion of the Variable Internet Entity (VIE) investment structure. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/0a1e4d78-0bf6-11e1-9310-00144feabdc0.html>

political status quo. However, faced with the fact that there has been no fundamental change, scholars have often looked to explain how the very thing which was once assumed to be menacing can be controlled and even become state-supporting by improving the effectiveness of authoritarian governance.

Hassid (2012), Xin (2008) and Yang (2009, 2013) have looked beyond the simple society-state binary and examined how the mainstream media may be a factor in mitigating or strengthening the impact of online discourse.

Literature Review Summary

The two previous chapters, taken together, paint a picture where absolute Party control is substantively threatened, by commercialisation, by protest and by public discourse. Control has been re-asserted through a strategic fusing of Party and market – access to commercial riches is expressly permitted, or denied, based on political favour. Moreover, the commercialisation which has resulted, rather than spurring on democratisation, has in fact forestalled change in that it has “underpinned much of the trivialization and de-politicisation of Internet content and usage in China” (Damm, 2009: 95), just as it has done in the press. The challenges of protest and public discourse, meanwhile, are met with a complex and evolving propaganda system which deploys targeted intervention rather than crude catch-all techniques⁶⁴. These may be characterised as focusing on ‘guiding public opinion’ through positive promotion rather than coercion or censorship.

⁶⁴ Though a slight diversion, it is interesting to note the manner in which these interventions echo those employed by the world’s central banks in their continuing response to the Financial Crisis of 2008. There is little sense of a coherent set of ideological beliefs at work. Instead, we see a highly technocratic and supremely pragmatic ‘hypodermic’ response, which makes periodic, targeted interventions for the purpose of stabilising and harmonising complex economies and polities.

Chapter 4: Analytical Framework

Introduction

The last two chapters have offered an account of historic and recent scholarship in two broad fields – the Chinese press and social contention in China. They treated each field as a relatively distinct entity, whilst occasionally pointing to links and areas of theoretical overlap. These are mainly found within the liberation-control paradigm which sees both possibilities for democratic enfranchisement and for increased state control in developments within each of these fields. This chapter moves on to providing a framework through which these core elements may be seen engaging in one fundamentally coherent process, one which seeks to avoid the liberation-control trap.

The first section examines *political* post-communist transition theories. It will begin by introducing the traditional democratic-versus-authoritarian binary. However, it challenges this in two specific areas. Firstly, it explains how fragmented control, caused by the rise of commercial and political interest groups, has not ceded power to forces of liberalism but rather dispersed it *within* the historically and culturally constituted state. In other words, rather than attempt to see Chinese politics within a simplistic state-versus-society frame, this section argues that it is vital to examine contention along alternative lines, especially the ‘public-versus-private’ and ‘central-versus-local’ axes.

The additional nuance that this adds to the ‘authoritarian’ side of the pendulum is balanced and buttressed by explaining how concepts from the ‘democratic’ side of the pendulum may also engage in political processes in China. The chapter thus introduces the concept of ‘responsive authoritarianism’. This idea has two chief strands: that government is presented as being *effective* in observing and responding to societal needs and, importantly, is *experimental* in delivering solutions. The chapter will introduce Pan’s theory of ‘bonded innovation’ (2012) where the state opens up space, sets boundaries and encourages experimentation. Citizens are, thus, not simply ‘bought off’ but rather support authoritarian rule because the state demonstrates democratic accountability in its ability to *listen* and *respond* effectively.

Media theory is then appended to this otherwise political framework. The narratives of democratic *responsiveness* and authoritarian *effectiveness* and external and internal *threat* require articulation and maintenance. This, therefore, requires a theory of the press to be sketched. The chapter will explain how the press is not simply a thing which facilitates democracy and freedom in the 'democratic' context or one-party rule in the 'authoritarian' context but rather that it is a resource used by a variety of political actors for specific purposes. In the Western context this requires discussion of the 'propaganda model' theory of the press, and, in the Chinese context, 'authoritarian' and 'Soviet' press theories. However, as this chapter will argue, both overstate the cohesiveness of power in their respective operating environments, as well as the nature of the 'bonded innovation' where commercial media may move away from dogma and heavy propaganda but still perpetuate certain core ideologies.

Finally, there is a discussion of the nature of those core ideologies, particularly as they apply to protest and social contention. These primarily involve the promotion of the Party as a bulwark against *external exploitation* and *disorder*, two historically and culturally-constituted fears which act as discursive resources. In this discussion, the chapter argues for the importance of studying the language of news discourse in terms of investigating broader currents in Chinese media and politics.

Post-communist transition theory

This thesis positions the research within a number of academic fields and a number of specific debates which will be delineated in this chapter. The broadest area of interest is the debate that has surrounded political transformation in the years since 1989.

This is an era in which many formerly communist states, principally in Europe, explicitly changed their ideological allegiance, jettisoning the political architectures imposed by the Soviet Union and apparently embracing, with varying alacrity, Western European norms. Many more nations – notably China – retained their notional 'socialist' nomenclature but nevertheless embarked on a radical move away from social and economic totalitarianism – characterised by a high degree of centralization and fidelity to a rigid ideological blueprint – toward more fluid and dynamic societies in which aspirations to social engineering receded and entrepreneurialism flourished. From the vantage point of the early-to-mid 2010s, the

only country which appears to remotely resemble the Soviet Union under Stalin, taken to be the epitome of totalitarianism, is North Korea. Consequently, in terms of geopolitics at least, it is reasonable to describe the current era to be one of 'post-communism'.

Transitology

These sweeping political changes have led to attempts to try to discern the patterns and nature of this move from communism to post-communism. The swiftness of the collapse of a succession of Eastern European communist governments within the Soviet political orbit in 1989 and 1990, and the final dissolution of the Soviet Union itself in 1991, led those who had taken sides in the ideological standoff of the previous 40 years to come to swift and definitive conclusions about the possibilities of Marxism and the political systems it gave rise to. Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, published in 1992 just months after the Soviet Union's collapse, epitomises the triumphalist response to the ostensible defeat of communism that existed in parts of the US political sphere, and across academia. Fukuyama's now-infamous 'end of history thesis' suggests that liberal democratic values had manifestly won out over the credible alternative that communism represented in the 20th Century, and, consequently, arguments over certain core questions of political and economic philosophy could be laid to rest. It extended a Whig historiography (Butterfield, 1931) by not only seeing the preceding half century as an inexorable march toward ever greater liberty, equality and rationality, but also suggesting that the ostensible victory of the US in its Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union essentially ended any argument over the precise direction of this forward march. There may still be a 'clash of civilisations' (Huntingdon, 1993), but it would coalesce around language, religion and culture, not society's core economic and political systems. Rule of law, state withdrawal from markets and a broad electoral franchise were thus established as superior ingredients and countries which lacked them would inevitably come to acquire them.

The problem with the transitological thesis is that it overstated its ostensible victory over alternative ideologies and overestimated the ability of liberal democratic governments to deliver prosperity, security and well-being to its citizens. China's

conspicuous rise under the banner of communism is perhaps the foremost piece of evidence in support of this dual critique. Despite lacking many of the political and social building blocks that Fukuyama identified as superior in his 1992 treatise⁶⁵, the PRC continues to thrive economically and to enhance its diplomatic stature.

Theories which posit a unidirectional transition from communist totalitarianism to liberal democracy are thus to be suspected. Fundamentally, they are ideologically blind in ignoring the manifold possibilities of synthesis between these two extreme models of political organisation, neither of which are unproblematic. It appears obvious that China is not caught between binaries such as democratic-versus-authoritarian, or, even more crudely, free-versus-unfree. Power has been ceded by a formerly totalitarian state, but it has not been handed over to the forces of liberalism but rather scattered within the historically- and culturally-constituted state. Thus, rather than a simplistic state-versus-society axis of analysis, as the transitologists tend to prefer, 'public vs. private' and 'central vs. Local' are more interesting loci of contention. These will be discussed below.

Axes of Contemporary Fragmentation

Public vs. Private: Corporate Authoritarianism

One of the core transitological arguments is that marketization and democratization must follow in step. Marketisation entails the creation of what might be termed a middle class, composed of both private business owners as well as a home-owning professional class. As their personal wealth increased, the theory held, they would seek a clearer political and legal framework to guard against the potential loss of their wealth by the arbitrary use of political power. Under such a conception, the market is society, and society the market. Society and state are thus pitched on an inevitable

⁶⁵ These building blocks are: rule of law, the withdrawal of the state from markets, and electoral democracy. Though the theme of the Fourth Plenum of the 18th Party Congress in October 2014 was the development of the 'rule of law' in China, there was no serious attempt to separate law and politics at the national level (Creemers, 2014). In other words, though law may yet constrain political actors lower down the Party hierarchy, it is unlikely to constrain those in Zhongnanhai. In the economic sphere, state-controlled enterprises still dominate large swathes of the economy. Finally, and perhaps less controversially, there is manifestly no widespread enfranchisement, though debates do exist over the relevance of local village elections and assumed intra-party democracy at the very top of the political hierarchy.

collision course, one that can only be avoided by the political classes relenting to this economically constituted pressure and voluntary ceding power.

However, as Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia and South Korea's examples had all demonstrated before the end of the Cold War, it should not have come as a surprise that "a flourishing capitalist economy always was compatible with the denial of democratic rights" (Mishra, 2014). Key is the manner in which observers of the "market-state problematic" (Sparks, 2010: 559) misidentified the key variable in profit-making. It was not, as transitologists might claim, merely the size of the consumer base. Rather, the key variable is revenue. Sparks argues that because revenue is dependent on economic conditions which are highly dependent on political permissions, the "opposition between market and politics" is mediated through the 'nexus' of local officials, entrepreneurs and media workers who managed those economic conditions (2010: 558). In other words, just because a market exists, it should not be assumed to be 'free'. It therefore follows that economic gain – be it at the personal or institutional level – requires political favour and thus an interdependency emerges. As Caragliano has it, "Chinese entrepreneurs forge close—and often profitable—ties with state officials, giving those entrepreneurs a vested interest in opposing any political shakeup" (2013).

Central vs. Local: Regionally Decentralized Authoritarianism (RDA)

Harrison and Ma (2013) have coined the term 'regionally decentralized authoritarianism' (RDA) to describe the system of political and economic organisation that presently exists in China. RDA is based around *economic* decentralisation allied with strong *political* centralisation. In such a system, political and economic decision-making may be highly devolved, but the centre's relative performance evaluation is essential to the functioning of the model.

Beneath China's central government⁶⁶, there are five administrative tiers: provincial, prefecture, county, township and village⁶⁷. The Chinese economy operates on a multi-

⁶⁶ To borrow Harrison and Ma's definition, central government, or the 'centre', is defined as the central political leadership institutions of the Party-state, namely the CCP's Politburo, the State Council, and their respective standing committees, which often have overlapping memberships (2013: 6)

⁶⁷ Note there is no room in this division for cities. Many provincial capitals operate as 'sub-provincial cities' – answerable to, and governed by, provincial governments, but independent economically – while the majority of land within individual provinces comprises 'prefecture level' cities. Within these

layer, multi-regional basis, where each region at each layer represents an 'operating unit'. Each unit is relatively self-sufficient and oversees its own enterprises along functional and specialization lines (Qian & Xu, 1993: 19). The hierarchical structure of each region at each level is approximate to that of the central government: just as central government hovers above 34 provincial level administrative blocks, a township may incorporate 10 to 20 villages. Junior tiers of government administer affiliated enterprises by function and specialization – finance or electronics, for example – and oversee the work of junior administrations within its jurisdiction (ibid).

RDA essentially entails a process of "asymmetric decentralization" (Chien, 2010) in which economic and political command structures have become disentangled in the reform and opening up period. "China's first and foremost devolution process since 1978 has been economic decentralization from the central to local level" (Shirk, 1993, cited in Chien, 2011: 71). Rather than privatise, China has decentralised and handed the economic reins over to increasingly junior politics units. However, this has occurred while maintaining upward-looking political command structures. Officials have a keen sense of answering politically to the centre, but promoting local development remains one of the strongest considerations for anyone looking to move up the power chain. "[Economic performance] is often seen to be more important than obedience to central policies or regulations" (Chien, 2010: 76).

RDA in China has deep historical roots. In the post-1949 period, RDA was first instituted in 1958 in a conscious rejection of Soviet-style centralization (Harrison & Ma, 2013: 7). Further back, regional decentralization became institutionalised under the Qing dynasty with its various regions constituted as distinct, independent economic units (ibid: 9).

RDA has a number of positive aspects, not least helping to generate China's remarkable recent economic growth (Chien, 2010). However, among the negative consequences she cites are uneven development at the national level, the encouraging of unsustainable development at the local level and, most pertinently for

urban areas there are further delineations ('district' and 'neighbourhood'), for example, but these may be regarded as tantamount to junior tiers within the six-tiered hierarchy. In other words, a 'district' within a prefecture-level city may have 'county' level responsibilities, and so on (Qian & Xu, 1993: 19).

the purposes of this thesis, *regional fragmentation*, with provincial level units often working at cross purposes.

Howell describes the Chinese administration as “polymorphous”, with different parts of the state locked in fierce competition that radically undermined co-ordinated activity:

The state in China is subject to fragmenting, eroding and hyper-rivalistic pressures — fragmenting because power and authority are diffused amongst a diversity of territorial and socio-economic actors, an outcome of decentralization and marketization; eroding because of the gradual decay of the class-based, Leninist Party machine and its institutional infrastructure; and hyperrivalistic because parts of the state are locked in competition with each other — sectorally and regionally — and with other nation-states in the world. (Howell, 2006: 291)

Obviously this must not be overstated. Clearly, China’s bureaucracy has not lost all coherency. Political centralisation is still strong and has been a vital ingredient in China’s long-term economic growth (Cai & Treisman, 2006). Moreover, since the mid-1990s there has been a re-centralization of fiscal administration⁶⁸ which has allowed the centre to reassert control over appointments and promotions and enforce provincial rivalries⁶⁹. “[P]olitical centralization is a necessary condition for economic decentralization to do its work” (Harrison & Ma, 2012: 6). Nevertheless, it remains the case that leaders at lower tiers of China’s political hierarchy enjoy far more autonomy within China’s one-party structure than is commonly assumed, even if that autonomy is largely economic in nature, and which is ultimately assessed within a centralized political structure.

⁶⁸ In other words, revenue must be transferred upward to the centre, before being returned back down to the local level, rather than being retained by local officials.

⁶⁹ Schell and Delury argue that one of Zhu Rongji’s main priorities between 1991 and 2003, a period when he was the central figure in the Chinese economy, was the *recentralisation* of the fiscal structure and the reclaiming of economic coordination for Beijing (2014: 336). Nevertheless, the fact remains that the control which Beijing ceded to the provinces in the 1980s has never been fully reclaimed and is cited as the reason China has achieved such remarkable growth rates in the intervening years. Indeed, the current concern shown by Beijing over local debt – in contrast to the bountiful fiscal reserves it marshals – demonstrates the fact that economic decision making remains primarily at local levels in China.

Fracture lines between the centre and the regions may not only be economically constituted. Patronage networks infuse Chinese politics, according to Shih, Adolph and Liu (2012). These may themselves be economically delineated but also may link to ideological divisions within elite politics. Bo Xilai, removed from office in 2012 and imprisoned for life the following year, was claimed by some to be a victim of his leftist, Mao-inspired political agenda.

Theorising the media along multiple fracture lines

Both fracture lines described above have important implications for China's media. The press exemplifies the ambiguous public-versus-private fracture. A highly commercialised press co-exists alongside ideologically-oriented Party publications. However, as explained in Chapter 2, these commercial outlets have almost exclusively been spun off *from* Party publications and are, therefore, only able to produce profit with the explicit permission of political actors.

Central-versus-local political fragmentation is also key in explaining why officials in China have looked to cooperate with entrepreneurs of various kinds:

The gradual loss of institutional purpose and political power on the part of local party cadres and authorities, coupled with the new opportunities provided to them by economic reform to replace their political power with economic power, and reinforced by the growing CCP emphasis on the importance of economic growth, have been the major factors in the increasing receptiveness of the party cadres to cooperation with China's rising capitalist class (Akhavan-Majid, 2004: 562).

Market power, thus conceived, is not then so much a sphere *outside* political power rather than something which penetrates *into* the political power structure⁷⁰. And that political power structure, by turns, fractures along regional and administrative lines, albeit within a system which requires a certain obedience to central authorities.

⁷⁰ There are important overlaps between the way the market and political power is conceptualised here, and parallel conceptualisations of the Internet and political power in China, discussed in Chapter 3. In both areas, there is a considerable degree of "mutual embeddedness", to use Lagerkvist's term (2010).

This configuration gives rise to the possibility of both horizontal and vertical diversity within China's media. Horizontally, political units from the provincial level down have achieved economic success, in large part, by acting in competition with each other. Given this, there is every reason to suspect that the media outlets affiliated with these respective political units may enjoy greater latitude in reporting issues from beyond the newspaper's particular constituency. This concept has long been noted in terms of investigative journalism in the phenomenon of so-called 'cross-regional reporting' (*yidi jiandu*) but may be of relevance to other, less sensational, forms of journalism.

Fragmentation conceived of a 'horizontal' – that is, within units conceived as operating on comparable planes of political seniority – the picture is more complex than basic inter-regional rivalry. Tensions may indeed exist between competing local governments at a macro level, but may be also expressed between competing ministries or departments within a single jurisdiction, or even between media departments working on 'new' or 'old' platforms (Lin, 2008).

Vertically, the structure of the press in China reflects the strictly hierarchical power arrangements inherent in the Chinese political system. Under this institutional configuration (a diagram of which is given below), publications privileged by their association with senior, or national political bodies, enjoy relative freedom in publishing critical reports of the actions of government bodies lower down the political hierarchy.



TABLE 1: REPRESENTATION OF VERTICAL POWER STRUCTURES WITHIN CHINESE PRESS

Responsive Authoritarianism

This chapter has so far weighed up the balance between liberalism and authoritarianism, and sought to introduce important nuance to the ‘authoritarian’ side of the pendulum by incorporating the fracture lines caused by commercial and regional fragmentation. It now attempts to buttress this by explaining how concepts from the ‘democratic’ side of the pendulum may also engage in political processes in China. It does so by introducing the concept of ‘responsive authoritarianism’⁷¹.

In the Chinese context, ‘responsive’, or ‘deliberative’ authoritarianism has two interlinked strands. Firstly, notwithstanding the Party-state’s authoritarian, autocratic veneer, it is *active* in observing societal needs and *experimental* in seeking solutions. This, in turn, produces a citizenry which, rather than being bought off by the Party –

⁷¹ This concept has been termed slightly differently by various scholars, according to the specific manner in which authoritarianism is presumed to be maintained. Stockmann (2013) and Bishop (2012), focusing on the role of the media and the Internet respectively, regard China has having a form of “responsive authoritarianism”; Brady (2010), highlighting central propaganda, prefers “popular authoritarianism”; Heilmann and Perry (2011) use the term “adaptive governance” in drawing parallels with the Maoist era, while Nathan (2003) prefers “authoritarian resilience”, which makes more plain the normative assumptions about its presumed opposite.

as in the classic conception of the post-1989 state-society bargain⁷² – rather supports authoritarian rule because the state demonstrates democratic accountability in its ability to *listen* and *respond* effectively.

Active and Experimental

Heilmann and Perry (2011) argue that the CCP's own historical trajectory – emerging as a guerrilla organisation in the 1920s – makes it prefer local and situational policy making, and experimental, as opposed to rule-bound, governance⁷³. The modern CCP maintains such adaptability. The establishment of free enterprise zones, Internet development, property reform, contemporary financial reform, and, most famously, the household responsibility system⁷⁴ itself are all examples of the Party taking such a cautious approach during the reform era (Zhang, 2014).

Not only has this assisted in the ideological transition of the last 30 years, it has facilitated dynamic economic growth. The reform process – famously described as one of 'crossing the river by feeling the stones' (*moshitou guohe*) – has proceeded on the basis of a series of pilot projects so that ideas can be tested and so that mistakes may be recognised and contained (Zhang, 2014). This same general process has applied specifically to media reform, as documented by Pan (2010; 2012), albeit one in which media reform is unambiguously a state-controlled project and "imbued with a strong systemic tendency towards preserving the political legitimacy of the Party-state" (Pan, 2010: 519).

The metaphor of crossing the river by feeling the stones runs into a slight problem when one considers *who*, figuratively speaking, has their feet wet. Bream suggests reform in China has consistently involved the Party undertaking "enabling measures" (2013: 2) rather than doing the legislative hard-lifting. Firms are not privatized. Rather,

⁷² This refers to the theory, so often repeated that it has become a truism, of a tacit bargain being struck between the government and the people following the epochal June 4 crackdown in Beijing. This, in summary, involved the Party agreeing to provide for ever-rising living standards in return for the people's willingness to stay out of politics. Such a bargain was, of course, never formally stated but China's former Premier, Zhu Rongji, came close to doing so in 1992 when he argued, during a visit to Guangdong, that "if we can increase the speed of economic construction, and continually raise the people's living standards, then the Party will be trusted and respected, and the people will support us" (Schell & Delury, 2013: 334)

⁷³ For more on Maoist continuities, see Schell and Delury (2013: 388-392).

⁷⁴ This involved allowing individual farmers to sell privately the surplus made from the plots they managed. This was pioneered in Anhui in 1977 in direct contravention of the national regulations which existed at the time but extended nationwide.

some shares, from a specific part of an enterprise, may be sold in a certain restricted fashion. Reform thus becomes a process which involves multi-party interactions, with the state, businesses, consumers, and workers each playing their role in interpreting and expanding the precise nature of the change. Pan describes this as “bonded innovation” (2012), It is the state which has opened up space for *potential* reform without necessarily having specific targets. Boundaries may be set around the reform space. However, within, *experimentation* is encouraged. Pan applies “bonded innovation” specifically to media workers but it can just as well apply to the other areas described above.

Even the boundaries of this experimental space tend to become altered under the pressure of the scarcely contained activity within. Akhavad-Majid calls this “creative renegotiation and expansion” (2004: 556-7). “Historically, the Chinese citizenry has been a dynamic participant in pushing the state’s policy openings far beyond those initially envisioned by the state” (ibid). Debates may exist as to how far this quality of reform is, itself, state willed. In other words, does the state *anticipate* boundaries being redrawn or does the act of redrawing represent social agency which may run counter to state goals? Ultimately, the theory of ‘responsive authoritarianism’ would see reform as being enabled, guided and controlled by the state but practically pursued by social actors.

Finally, the Party’s protean adaptability and absolute pragmatism is evident in the co-option of various socio-economic groups, another tactic with deep roots in Party history. Co-option of the middle-classes has been a very deliberate political strategy during the years of rapid economic change (Saich, 2010). Landmark rulings in 2004 enshrined limited property rights for the first time under communist rule, and entrepreneurs have been officially welcomed within the Party since the national congress of the same year⁷⁵. Co-option has also notably occurred with religious organisations.

⁷⁵ It should be noted that, rather than being a case of opening doors to newcomers, this move may be seen as formal acceptance of those who were already present. That is to say, very many Party members were already engaged in entrepreneurial activities.

Listening and responsiveness

The second major strand of 'responsive authoritarianism' is the Party-state's ability to observe and respond to societal pressures and demands, thereby enhancing its popularity. Indeed, assiduous attention to public opinion is, to Brady, a "new political paradigm", one she dubs 'Popular Authoritarianism' (2010: 194).

That the Party *is* popular is not in doubt. Surveys cited by Jacques (2009), Fenby (2009) and Whyte (2010) attest to broad support for the Party at national level, in spite of issues of corruption and inequality which, in the latter's case, were clearly expected to diminish public sympathy (Whyte, 2010). This support does not extend to all corners of the administration. Fenby argues that central leadership is buttressed by an 'age-old' belief in the virtuousness of central authorities vis-à-vis venal local officials. "Surveys show that the approval rating for the authorities diminishes as one goes down the chain of command. The old idea persists that corruption and malpractice stem mainly from functionaries at village, township and county level (be they imperial magistrates or Party village bosses) and would be put right by the supreme power in the capital if only it knew how its servants were misbehaving" (Fenby, 2012).

And now it does know, thanks to online communications. The Internet looms large as the primary mechanism of "popular authoritarianism", and is discussed at more length in the section on the 'Networked Public Sphere' in Chapter 3. Though the Party has long cultivated organisations designed to feed information in an upward direction within governing hierarchies, these have been found ineffective – sometimes catastrophically so⁷⁶ – particularly in a culture touched by Confucian caution and Communist sycophancy. The Internet, rather, provides an opportunity to sidestep the administrative sycophants of junior government and gauge genuine public opinion (Ferguson, 2012). Without denigrating the qualities of its own internal communications, the State Council Information Office (SCIO) acknowledges as much. A White Paper declares "the internet...has become a bridge facilitating direct communication between government and the public" (cited in Yang, 2010: 234).

⁷⁶ Administrative reticence to send accurate production data up the command structure led to mass famine during the Great Leap Forward (*dayuejin*), according to mainstream historical opinion (Becker, 1996; Dikötter, 2010). Chang and Halliday (2005) argue that the catastrophe was, rather, the result of wilful ignorance on the part of China's then leader.

Online communications may help to identify issues which need political attention or provide an opportunity to directly address specific concerns. It also uncovers misdemeanour and malfeasance, but in a manner which proves ultimately state-enhancing. The Party-state frequently steps into mete punishment to corrupt junior officials who may have been exposed online.

Within a ‘responsive authoritarian’ frame, online communications do not constitute a public sphere in the Habermasian sense. Rather the Internet becomes a heavily monitored ‘talking shop’ which may be, depending on the preferred metaphor, an “echo-chamber” (Bradshaw, 2008) where the evangelical preach to the already-converted, or a pressure cooker “safety valve” (Hassid, 2012) where anger is vented in a controlled manner. Key to this is the transience of online discourse and, vitally, the option of outright suppression. There are countless tales of egregious corruption or immorality among officials⁷⁷ which reach a cross-class, cross-regional audience. However, rather than being suppressed, these tales of venality, and subsequent reprimand, become ‘memes’ which linger long on the Chinese web. These invariably paint central government as democratic, responsive and efficient, and thus enhance the image of the strong, authoritarian state (Herold, 2013). Those which do not are easily removed.

To conclude this section, responsive authoritarianism may be seen as an outgrowth of the transitological liberal-versus-authoritarian framework in that it maintains the *reality* of authoritarian control and seeks to offer explanations for why liberal values – individual rights, rule of law, electoral democracy – may be forestalled. In such a view, responsive authoritarianism is merely a strategy which involves doing whatever is required to maintain control⁷⁸.

The danger of such views is that, in seeking to explain why China hasn’t changed along the same lines as transitology predicts, other, perhaps more subtle, changes are

⁷⁷ Among the most prominent of recent years are the cases of Yang Dacai, or ‘Brother Watch’ (*biaoge*), who was photographed in 2012 wearing a suspiciously expensive watch at the scene of a traffic accident in Shaanxi, and the case of Lei Zhengfu, a Sichuanese party official who was stripped of his position and jailed after a online video was uploaded in 2012 showing him having sex in a hotel with his mistress.

⁷⁸ See Lorentzen (2013) for a *par excellence* example of this approach.

elided. The only change perceived is the change which *preserves* a decrepit Party-state and overall political stasis.

An alternative perspective sees a more sincere effort to engage with societal needs and deliver better governance⁷⁹. Though one-party rule is unchallenged, the Party-state is engaged in a process where its quasi-democratic role is the balancing of divergent interests in increasingly complex polity.

This thesis makes no firm theoretical assumptions in respect of these differing ideas about the motivation for ‘adaptive’ authoritarian strategies, but acknowledges the debate. However, it *does* make the vital assumption that the ostensibly liberal changes discussed at length in this thesis – specifically, the growth of public discourse online and media commercialisation – may not only be compatible with authoritarianism but may even work to strengthen it (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011).

The media play a vital role in the *projection of* and *conduct of* responsive authoritarianism (Brady, 2010; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011; Stockmann, 2013).

Moves to commercialise and liberalise the media have, of course, opened up considerable space for discourses which would once have appeared extremely threatening to the Party. However, while commercial media profit through increased credibility and popularity with their audiences, the move away from dogmatic and crudely propagandized ideologies fosters a more benign image of the Party-state which reduces both costs and challenges to the government (Stockmann, 2013). Moreover, the Party is *still* able to insist on certain representations – a concern for the powerless, the effectiveness of market reform – and commercial media appear content to work within such boundaries – some of which are more fluid than others – even in the absence of invasive control mechanisms.

Discussion of the specific role the media plays in enabling so-called “responsive authoritarianism” requires a clearer conception of press function to be appended to the proposed theoretical framework, and it is to this subject that the chapter now turns.

⁷⁹ See Rosenzweig (2014), French (2012) and Bishop (2012), among others.

Authoritarian Press Theory

Introduction

The historical juncture at which this thesis is being written is particularly fecund for theoretical questions about the nature of the press and wider media. In 2012, the Leveson Inquiry⁸⁰ prompted a prolonged period of introspection pointed to the substantial gap between the ideology of ‘free journalists’ working within a ‘free press’ to defend a purported ‘public interest’, and the machinations of powerful societal institutions. Prior to Leveson, as the inquiry became colloquially known, most professional observers of the British press would likely have agreed with the suggestion that the press performed a powerful fourth estate (McQuail, 2005: 168) function in the British context and was thus a valuable and necessary brake on power. Though examples may be paraded to support this point of view, Leveson pointed to the way in which institutional culture and senior decision-making can both curb journalistic freedom and dictate journalistic behaviour.

In this, there is considerable overlap between the UK and China, as this section will demonstrate. Leveson successfully highlighted how institutions such as the press are, to borrow a term from Network Theory, ‘nodes’ (Christakis & Fowler, 2010) within a map of power. This thesis assumes that though the precise ‘map’ of institutional actors may well vary from country to country, there is a deeper consistency in terms of that map’s constituent parts and interactional dynamics. In so-called ‘democratic’ societies, as in so-called ‘authoritarian’ societies, the media operates in a web of power in which politics and business interlink. These assertions act as a philosophical gird to the following discussion, which articulates an updated version of both Siebert, Peterson and Schramm’s ‘Marxist Press Theory’ (1956) and Chomsky and Herman’s ‘Propaganda Model’ (1989) to argue how these seemingly opposing visions of press function may, actually, be better viewed as operating on a circular continuum, with significant crossover between Authoritarian and Liberal press theory.

⁸⁰ A judicial inquiry into press standards and ethics instituted by the British Parliament which ran from 2011 until 2012 and revealed sustained and editorially-sanctioned criminality by journalists, as well as collusion between press proprietors, editors and reporters and figures from both the British executive and the police.

Orientation to press functionalism

Society consists of a constellation of co-existing individuals. Theory is required to understand the network of institutions which holds that constellation in some kind of stable order. Authoritarian press theory may be seen as a form of functionalist media theory which seeks to explain how communication processes may achieve the 'social integration' (McQuail, 2005: 99) alluded to. The basic processes involved are: surveillance of the environment (information provision); correlation of social parts (norm-setting, status-signalling); heritage transmission (maintaining commonality of values); entertainment provision (reduction of tensions); and mobilisation (campaigning for societal objectives) (Lasswell, 1948; Wright, 1960; and Mandelsohn, 1966, cited by McQuail, 2005: 97).

Media, indeed information itself, should thus be seen as a potential resource for those seeking to generate social integration. Rather than being constitutive of any given independent function – to provide information, to facilitate democracy, to sustain one-party rule, or, more prosaically, to entertain – they are seen as agents of those who exercise political and economic power (Altschull, 1994; Bennett, 1996; Walker & Orttung, 2014).

Framing the media as something akin to a 'tool' of order maintenance is problematic on several levels. Firstly, the framework is necessarily a conservative one, effective in offering explanations for states of equilibrium but less effective in explaining change. Secondly, its macro frame of analysis is not well suited to accommodating the perspectives of either media workers or those who use mass media. Finally, given politics itself might be reasonably defined as the management – usually the maintenance – of power relations within a given polity, a structural-functionalist framework tends to prioritise media's *political* function. Such a focus inevitably neglects the impact that the media may have in shaping culture or acting as a forum for cultural transformations (Sparks, 2010). All these weaknesses are acknowledged. However, a functionalist perspective remains a very useful framework for analysing political communications which is the primary interest of this thesis.

Theories of the press

The “original theory of the press” (McQuail, 2005: 169) emerged during the 18th century, a tumultuous period of British history where the basis of political legitimacy moved from “blood and God” to the “will of the people” (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009). Stepping into this milieu were pamphleteers from the intellectual elite who used the printing press, a relatively new technology imported from Germany, to publically argue for Enlightenment ideals of individual liberty. English writer Edmund Burke coined the term ‘fourth estate’ in the late 18th century (ibid.) to describe the power of the press on a par with the House of Lords, House of Commons and the Church of England within the British political system – reinforcing the notion of the press as an institution of power within a wider power network⁸¹. The theory arose from Enlightenment concepts of rationality as espoused by thinkers such as John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville. By reporting the work of Parliament, so the theory held, the press was the cornerstone of representative democracy. The information relayed to the public allowed rational discussion of political issues and thus the hope of correct outcomes and ultimate ‘progress’.

The Four Theories of the Press

It was the geo-political rise of the Soviet Union, where a Marxist-Leninist notion of the press had ostensibly taken root after 1917, that prompted the first serious academic enquiry into alternative paradigmatic possibilities for the role and responsibilities of the press in non-US or Western European societies. This fledgling enquiry intersected with the rise of the ‘transmission model’ (McQuail, 2005: 64) of the media which stressed the impact of media effects. Wartime propaganda (by fascist, communist and democratic nations alike) along with the rise of the television society in 1950s America, had prompted debates over the means by which the any given population, could be manipulated, even transformed, by mass media messages.

⁸¹ Edmund Burke, often characterised as an ardent liberal, took a deeply conservative view of social change. He bitterly opposed the French Revolution and conceived a press which was exercising ‘fourth estate’ powers as a mechanism by which the largely aristocratic social structure of 18th century Britain could be held in order. The press, in such a conception, may work to prevent the arbitrary abuse of power, one of Burke’s great pre-occupations, but was not a vehicle for radical reform (Norman, 2013)

Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's influential text, *The Four Theories of the Press* (1956), represents a significant moment in the theorization of these debates. *Four Theories* placed its emphasis on the differences, in basic form and theory, between the operation of the press in the 'communist' Soviet Union and the 'capitalist' United States of America. Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's typology identified four broad categorical divisions of press systems: authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and Soviet.

Authoritarian Press Theory

The authoritarian model is identified as the default setting for most press systems. It is identified as the most historic and still the most prevalent of media types, one in which the press, though privately owned, functions as a tool of the state. Its guiding principle, according to Siebert, may be summarised by the words of Samuel Johnson: "Every society has a right to preserve public peace and order, and therefore has a good right to prohibit the propagation of opinions which have a dangerous tendency" (Siebert et al, 1956: 36). The specific control mechanism used may vary according to specific historical context, but the results are broadly the same: the press serves the propaganda needs of the elite and operates as the primary tool of social control.

That isn't to say that the needs of the 'masses' are neglected or uniformly oppressed in the authoritarian vision of the press. Rather, the authoritarian press is grounded in a set of philosophical assumptions which posits the individual as being naturally subordinate to the group and suggests the individual can only find value and meaning in belonging to a polity which is stable, unified and necessarily unequal. The state becomes the summation of desirable attributes which have the effect of civilising and socialising an otherwise rootless and uncivil individual. Crudely put, what's good for the elite is, ultimately, good for all.

Under such an arrangement – with publishing decisions delegated to private, profit-making concerns – Siebert claims there is some flexibility as to what the press may publish. Indeed, there may even be some occasions when, assuming the audience is sufficiently limited, there may be scope for nuanced political issues to be discussed. However, the press is restricted from engaging the masses. Rather publishers who might be reaching non-elite actors are required to 'announce' and 'explain' the

results of private deliberations rather than draw readers into an argument. Obviously, any materials which might be construed as an attempt to unseat, or even undermine, the ruling powers, would be unacceptable.

Soviet Press Theory

The distinction that Schramm draws between the authoritarian and the Soviet system is two-fold. Firstly, there is the issue of ownership of the media. The Soviet communist press is seen as being exclusively owned by the state. Not only is the profit motive thus removed from publishers' calculations, the press also becomes an entirely monolithic creation – one institution that is integrated with various other instruments of the state and imbued with a singular ideology.

Secondly, the Soviet press displays more of an acute emphasis on what might crudely be called political propaganda or agitprop. Where publishers under the authoritarian system might be restricted negatively – told what they *cannot* say – the Soviet press was restricted positively – told what it *must* say. In this sense the Soviet press is explicitly an instrument of social change, a “propagandist, agitator, organiser” in Lenin's phrase (Siebert et al, 1956: 116). Marxist theory, which inverted Hegel's notion of dialectical materialism, posits that man will be changed when society is changed – bluntly, man is entirely the product of his environment – and thus the press plays a critical role in changing the environment, or at least changing the impression of the environment, so that a new, communist man might emerge. In this effort, the press takes an incredibly serious view of itself. Entertainment is absent and words are seen as tools, not of any higher truth, but rather of achieving desirable ends⁸².

In a related vein, Schramm goes to great lengths to explain how the Soviet journalist's concept of his 'responsibility' is judged only on one criterion – his ability to adhere to the 'line':

⁸² This discussion of media 'truth' has interesting echoes with *means* and *ends* arguments around 'democracy' and 'human rights'. Schell & Delury (2013), amongst others, have seen a distinction between democracy and human rights being used as *means* or *ends* by a succession of Chinese thinkers and statesmen. The Western assumption, they argue, is that democracy is an *end* to aspire to – an inherent good, which will, in itself, produce a stronger, fairer and more stable society. Chinese figures such as Lu Xu and Liu Xiaobo have articulated this view (2014: 353). Other Chinese thinkers – Feng Guifen and Liang Qichao, for example – rather came to see democracy as being extremely useful, but as *means* in the service of the greater end, national revival (ibid).

The purpose for [the Soviet press] is the generation of unity. It is clear that the Marxist concept of unity and the sharp distinction between right and wrong positions, would not permit the press to function as a Fourth Estate...[or] as a forum for free discussion. Rather the Communist press would be conceived as an instrument to interpret the doctrine, to carry out the policies of the working class or the militant party. (Siebert et al, 1956: 110)

In a state where the revolution is directed by a vanguard of elite revolutionaries, and in a society where unity has an ‘almost mythical value’ (ibid: 107), one’s duty as a news worker is to adhere to the correct line. Ostini and Fung explain a Communist conception of media as being “tools that serve as implements of revelation... [and] of unity and consensus” (2002). Indeed, in Schramm’s mind, the Russians would have perceived American media’s “lack of agreement, or permissiveness towards argument, compromise and criticism” as “anarchy and chaos” (Siebert et al, 1956: 107).

Notably, Siebert, Peterson and Schramm made scarcely a mention of China in *The Four Theories*, with the implication being that China’s press system, what was known of it at that time, was a close approximation of the Soviet’s and could safely be categorised with the Soviet label.

Libertarian and Social Responsibility Models

On the other side of the ideological divide in *Four Theories* are the libertarian model and “its nicer younger sibling” (Nerone, 1995: 181), the social responsibility model. The libertarian model is fundamentally a description of the ideal press as envisaged by Enlightenment political philosophers such as Locke and Paine, where publishers exist beyond state control and their collective output represents a forum for the ‘free market place’ of ideas which can compete for the attentions of a rational public without interference or manipulation. Peterson ascribes six functions to the libertarian press: offering the political class the information necessary to govern; giving the voting class the necessary information to select its government; acting as the watchdog of government; using advertising to unite buyers and sellers of goods; provision of entertainment; profit-making with the purpose of keeping itself free of political interference (Siebert et al, 1956: 73).

Recognising, it seems, the impossibility of crafting such a press in reality, Peterson argues the social responsibility model – the closest fit to the US press – recognises the possibility that the pursuit of profit inevitably interferes with the ‘public interest’ (ibid) aspects of the model – the unfettered exchange of equally competing ideas which assist both the governors and the governed in making rational choices. Rather it envisages a tacit exchange between state and media, with the state guaranteeing media certain freedoms, including the freedom to pursue profit and the freedom from government control, and the press conversely agreeing to behave ‘responsibly’ in furnishing both the state and citizens with fair, balanced and truthful information and ensuring that the entertainment it provides is ‘good entertainment’ (ibid: 74). Irresponsible behaviour, thus defined, carries the legitimate threat of state sanction.

Conceptualising continuum

Theories which conceptualise difference along a single, liberal axis – that of greater or lesser *individual freedom* versus greater or lesser *state interference* – tend to overstate the dangers of political interference in the media and fail to recognise the plurality of power in both liberal capitalist societies and ostensibly monolithic political systems like China’s (Curran, 2013; Wu, 2010).

Such an objection points towards a solution to the trap of forever seeing the press – perhaps even political change more broadly – on a continuum between liberalism and authoritarianism, by drawing attention to the commonalities between these systems, and pointing to a more useful frame of analysis – that of power networks.

Among the most important of these alternative power sources is capital. Herman and Chomsky’s Propaganda model (1988), extended by Bennett’s Elite Indexing model⁸³ (1990), point to an overlap between the liberal and authoritarian press theory. The model conceives the press as a business concerned primarily with the construction of an audience which can then be sold – just like any other product – to advertisers. The delivery of truthful and democratically-relevant information is always secondary to the pursuit of profit. The Propaganda Model theory postulates five ‘filters’ that determine the kind of news that is published or broadcast. The first three concern

⁸³ This suggests news professionals are only at liberty to ‘index’ the range of voices that are expressed in mainstream government debate.

market mechanisms; rather than being guided by a determination to supply democratically-necessary 'news', Herman and Chomsky argue that content is dictated by, one, the economic interests of the owners of the medium; two, the sources of funding that medium relies on – usually advertising; and, three, the generally official nature of the sources of information. In addition, two further non-economic 'filters' are identified: 'flak' refers to the phenomenon of political forces making a concerted effort to manage public information via "complaint, threat and punitive action" directed at the media outlet; and an ideology of fear⁸⁴ (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The Propaganda Model contains many potential points of cross-over with the modern Chinese media. As Herman and Chomsky argue, "...the U.S. media do not function in the manner of the propaganda system of a totalitarian state. Rather, they permit – indeed encourage – spirited debate, criticism, and dissent, as long as these remain faithfully within the system of presuppositions and principles that constitute an elite consensus" (1988: 302). This chimes strongly with visions of China's media as a nexus of co-operation between China's political and business classes where profit is extracted while political authority is buttressed by permitting contained and inherently limited debate (Stockmann, 2013; Zhao, 2008; Lee, 2000; Lee et al, 2006; Akhavan-Majid, 2004).

The biggest problem that both Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model and Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's authoritarian equivalent have is the assumption of elite consensus (Sparks, 2007). Just as it is in the US media, the subject of Herman and Chomsky's theorising, the Chinese 'elite' may be differentiated along the 'fracture lines' discussed earlier in this chapter, with no single source of authority. Schramm's model of the Soviet press may have had some relevance to Stalinist Russia of the 1930s, or Mao's China of the 1950s, when a single individual appeared to wield almost unlimited personal power. However, the Chinese political system has undergone profound change and horizontal and vertical distinctions exist throughout the CCP, and even among personal patronage networks which exist within.

⁸⁴ The original 'fear' was conceptualised as being that of 'anti-communist' fear and specifically labelled as such in Herman & Chomsky's Cold War-era text. The fall of the Soviet Union and the extinction of Soviet communism led to the updated and more generalised term, 'fear' which can be said to include fear of radical Islam and specific dictators such as Saddam Hussein.

Comparing Media Systems and Corporate Authoritarianism

Attempts to formulate exhaustive 'theories of the press' have encountered two major criticisms: either they became normative prescriptions for ideal press systems which tended to ignore empirical evidence; or, as in the case of the Soviet or Social Responsibility models, they are best seen as descriptions of specific societies at specific historical junctures. In other words, the analysis tended to be of societies – either real or imagined – rather than media systems.

It was because of such concerns that Hallin and Mancini proposed a 'proper burial' (2004: 10) for the *Four Theories* schema. They did not wish to jettison entirely the notion of searching for typologies, but rather to suggest that the unit of analysis should not be 'content, purpose and effects' but rather the commonalities in 'media logic'. Siebert, Peterson and Schramm had pivoted their analysis on a single question: the extent to which a press was free, or not free, of state control or manipulation. Hallin and Mancini proposed a set of four variables on which to base a comparative analysis of media systems. One of these remained the extent of 'state intervention'. The other three, weighted equally, were: the development of a mass press; political parallelism (the strength of links between politics and the press, and the extent to which the press reflects the constituent parts of the political system), and the professionalization of journalists.

The resulting typology which Hallin and Mancini alight upon divides the Western Europe and North America press into three kinds: the liberal model, reasonably analogous to Peterson's social responsibility model (Siebert et al, 1956); the democratic corporate model in which political media and commercial media co-exist with the state playing some role; and the polarized pluralist model, where the lines between different political views are clearly staked and the media play an active role in forging and maintaining them (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Sparks has argued that one might need only invent a single further categorisation – that of *corporatist authoritarianism* – to bring most of the world's other press systems – China included – into the analytical fold. Schmitter defines corporatism generally as an "institutional arrangement in which corporations are created and sanctioned by the state and are

kept as auxiliary and dependent organs of the state, and through which the state maintains control over and intervention in the management of these corporations” (1974, cited in Tai, 2006). Thus, Sparks’ ‘corporate authoritarianism’ model would see political media and commercial media co-existing, as under democratic corporatism, but with the state remaining the sole arbiter of the terms of commercial activity⁸⁵.

Hallin and Mancini neglect to consider “the ideological maintenance of state authority as an avenue along which the state ‘intervenes’ into the media (Roudakova, 2012: 254-55). This is particularly pertinent in China where, even amid decentralisation and commercialisation, state media may be involved in defining the boundaries of discourse. Zhao is right to argue that one cannot give the *Four Theories* its ‘proper burial’ because China represents a “major mutation of the Soviet communist model” (2012: 143).

This is primarily constituted in continued ideological control. Rather than define the press’s task negatively – to forbid certain topics and aggressively censor those which transgress agreed boundaries – the Chinese press, like its Soviet cousin, is tasked with being a *positive* ancillary of change. Given the history of western imperialism, civil war and social conflict in the 19th and 20th centuries, the modern Chinese state “is invested with the normative expectations of promoting positive freedoms, defending territorial sovereignty, promoting national integration, as well as engendering social economic developments” (Zhao, 2012: 150).

This important aspect of state intervention requires the promotion of a hybrid ideology which borrows liberally from Marxism, Post-Colonialism, Nationalism and Developmental discourses⁸⁶. The nature of these discourses will be discussed in the next section.

⁸⁵ See Akhavan-Majid (2004) and Lee, He and Huang (2006) for fuller explanations of how such a press model may function.

⁸⁶ For more, see Barme (2012) and Garton-Ash (2014).

Language and ideology in China media discourse

The so-called ‘normative’ theories of the press, described above, are primarily concerned with explaining the ‘behaviour and performance’ (Herman, 2000, cited in Freedman, 2009) of a media system in achieving social integration. Such an approach makes it necessary to at least *consider* media effects within the frame of analysis. There would, of course, be no point in maintaining a behaviour if that behaviour had no anticipated impact.

Though this thesis does not attempt to examine how media texts are read or understood by audiences in China, it will make certain assumptions about the power of language to define and limit spheres of thought. These set of assumptions build on the work of Western discourse scholars who have demonstrated how the integration of the parts of any given text - lexical items, propositions, implications, presuppositions, descriptions, local and global coherence – may function to construct ideology (Van Dijk, 1998: 31-40). It is also necessary to say a few words about the power of language specifically in Chinese political communications.

An orientation to the importance of language in China

Most scholars of Chinese politics have tended to attempt to analyse the CCP’s propaganda system at the macro level (Brady, 2010; Shambaugh, 2007, 2009). Though clearly important – and discussed in the previous chapter – structural analyses of institutions and processes can only ever articulate the hinterland of control. Equally pertinent is that aspect of propaganda which confronts consumers of media in China at the visceral level – language. Language can be seen as being on the front line of the propaganda effort and several scholars have sought to understand the way in which mediatised language is used to conduct politics (Schoenhals, 1992; Davis, 2013; Barme, 2012; Link, 2013). Indeed, the CCP’s continued domination of formal discourse and ideology, as discussed in the last section, demands closer scrutiny of “linguistic behaviour” (Barme, 2012: 2).

Certain aspects of mediatised language can be considered “forms of power” because they have an intrinsic power to “cut off alternative ways of thinking and limiting the conceptual horizons of the people who adopt them” (Link, 2013a: 275). This affirms a

Maoist vision of the power of the language, set out in Yan'an in 1942, where "conformity with a specific public vocabulary of political terminology approved by the Party" is carried out "on the assumption that politically correct language causes politically correct thinking and behaviour" (Chilton et al, 2012: 10). The manipulation of public language is embedded deep in pre-communist culture. The *Rectification of Names*, a Confucian doctrine, outlines "a view of language according to which words determine thoughts" (ibid: 12).

The language philosophy involved here is not, it seems, like the Platonic doctrine...that words naturally denote their real-world referents. Rather, it seems clear...that words should be chosen by the ruler in the belief that they determine the way people think about reality, in line with policies espoused." (ibid)

The proper labelling of things in the world, thus, generates amongst users of the language a proper understanding of the relationship between things. Confucian doctrine therefore suggests social disorder may derive from a failure to correctly label the world.

The view that language may be a saviour of the nation persisted into the communist era. Chen Yun, one of the eight elders of the CCP and, alongside Deng Xiaoping, the most important leader in the post-1978 period, suggested language would be far more important than economics in the course of reform, tasking the "Party's propaganda apparatus – the men and women who "wield the pens" – with the preservation of "national stability and unity" (Schoenhals, 1992: 26).

Drawing on linguistics to argue that 'perlocutionary' language will inevitably produce "certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience" (Austin, 1962: 101), Schoenhals is highly critical of students and scholars of Chinese politics who "relegate the role of language to the periphery, rather than to the centre" (1992: 5).

Why is it that the art of doing things with words so dear to China's homo politicus has not received the same attention as, for instance, the "art of guanxi"? The first explanation that comes to mind has to do with

academic training. Political scientists are unlikely to regard language as being of fundamental importance in itself and rarely look upon it as anything but a kind of container, “a conduit for the communication of the essence of thought or reality.” (Schoenhals, 1992: 5-6)

The ‘dual-track’ language of political communications

Chinese novelist Yan Lianke has argued that there are “currently two conflicting language systems in China, one belongs to the state, the other to ordinary people” (Yan, cited in Davis, 2013: 385). Indeed, many scholars looking at language within the context of Chinese political communications have observed the same gap between what might be termed ordinary language and the language of politics. Yang distinguishes between “official discourse” and the distinctively plural (and online) “speech genres” (2009: 140). He (2000) differentiates between “public” and “personal” discourse, Link (2013) between “official” Chinese and everyday language, while Moser (2006) discusses “news” versus “non-news”, suggesting the former has a particular imprimatur of officialdom. Davis has suggested these two spheres, variously labelled, are actually interdependent in the sense that opinion leaders may transmit official modes to everyday speech and official language may be vernacularised (Davis, 2013)⁸⁷. The extent to which these two seemingly separate spheres are converging, particularly under the sway of online discourse, is a rich future research avenue, as suggested by scholars such as Meng (2010), but beyond the immediate purview of this thesis. What can be said with reasonable confidence is that the Party continues to assert control over language and continues to see language as a mode of power and a tool of social control (Schoenhals, 1992; Link, 2013; Davis, 2013).

Link’s ‘Official’ Chinese

Link argues that the ‘official’, and ‘unofficial’ Chinese used in mainland China operates in two distinct spheres. This isn’t to say that two different kinds of people use it, rather than they are registers used by almost all people at one time or another for differing purposes. Link cites former CCP General Secretary, Hu Yaobang. “What you

⁸⁷ This came to particular prominence during Xi Jinping’s inauguration speech in 2013 when he was widely praised within China for using frank, down-to-earth language which contrasted strongly with the highly formalised language of his predecessor in the role of CCP chairman, Hu Jintao.

might say casually at home,’ Hu told an assembly of officials, ‘doesn’t matter very much. But to speak in public is to do official thought-work, and this produces social effects...that can be good or bad.’ Hu was accepting the political bifurcation of the Chinese language and simply trying to ensure that the two kinds of language operated in their proper sphere” (Link, 2013a: 240).

Link defines ‘official Chinese’ in five different categories: lexicon; grammar and rhythm; accretion of moral weight; goal orientation; and *tifa*.

‘Official’ lexicon is characterised by militaristic and gaseous language such as generally polysyllabic, Western-derived abstractions with no concrete meaning but which add a veneer of scientific impartiality⁸⁸; ‘official’ grammar and rhythm is characterised by frequent use of stative verbs, the transformation of adjectives into transitive verbs, and the frequent use of repetition and number lists to draw attention to form rather than content; the ‘accretion of moral weight’ in ‘official’ language involves ostensibly neutral words being repeatedly associated with positive or negative aspects, despite the word itself having no inherent moral orientation; the ‘goal orientation’ of ‘official’ language refers to the habit of official discourse to state goals without explanation of potential methods. Readers are thus “told where to get to, but not how to get there” (Link, 2013a: 215). Finally, *tifa* refers to set, stock phrases, or ways of referring to specific issues or problems.

The dissonance between highly formalised ‘official’ language and everyday ‘unofficial’ Chinese produces in China a ‘language game’, suggests Link, where:

...utterances in the official language game are more reliable than ordinary assertions about truth or falsity. In ordinary language, a statement might or might not be true, and if a speaker means deliberately to deceive a listener, that statement is called a lie. But in the language game, where

⁸⁸ Science has an important and complex relationship with reform and change in China. The borrowing of the West’s advanced scientific techniques (the West’s so-called *yong*) has invariably been advocated by Chinese reformers in the post Opium War period (Schell & Delury, 2013) and has been central to the post-78 transformation of the Chinese economy, with the number of students studying sciences in the West increasing exponentially each year since the early ‘80s. Marxism-Leninism has long sought to present itself as a scientifically-based set of beliefs rather than a utopian philosophy. Finally, the leadership under Hu and Wen in the 2003-2013 period positively prided themselves on technocratic, evidence-based competence.

the standard is not “Is it true or not?” but “Does it serve the speaker’s interests or not?” the counterpart of a “lie” is not possible. The person who hears a statement can be 100 percent sure that “this speaker believe that this statement serves his or her interests.” It might not be easy to figure out exactly what the specific interest is, but one can be sure that the speaker is aiming at it. It also can happen that a speaker miscalculates in the choice of words which will actually serve his or her interests. But that, too, does not change the principle that the speaker believes that the words will be expedient. To experienced players of the language game, this “impossibility of a lie” is a useful fact. One can use it to analyse what a speaker is doing with words. (2013: 281)

Barme’s ‘Newspeak’

Barme has also sought to codify many of these theme in terms of a single description of China’s “mainstream official language”, that of “New China Newspeak” (2012: 1). This is used by the Party, propaganda organs, media outlets and teachers to “shape (and circumscribe) the way people express themselves” (ibid). Barme identifies a “military-poetic complex” within post-1949 Mandarin which melds revolutionary discourse to poetic whimsy (ibid: 11). Numeration, he also agrees, is a favoured tactic of Party prose, as is the “moral-evaluative” nature of the language (ibid: 9).

Barme notes the seemingly mongrel nature of modern political discourse. “It is the concern of many students of things Chinese (be they in or outside China) that the yawning gap between reality and rhetoric should, in the long run, make things untenable, or lead to some massive revision or collapse of the vestigial ideological power of the party-state.” (Barme, 2012: 9). He, instead, argues that the tendency to meld, say, scientific or technical jargon, classical references, market economy tropes and Marxist terminology does not signal an ideology which has lost its way. Rather:

...the ruling ideology has gone through a transmogrification rather than a collapse, absorbing both leftist and neo-liberal ideas. In this context ‘ideology’, as Epstein puts it, ‘becomes simply a habit of thinking, a manner of expression, the prism through which all views and expressions are refracted without depending on specific views and ideas – a sort of

universal network that may be compared to the advertising networks of Western nations.' (Barme, 2012: 10, citing Mikhail Epstein⁸⁹)

Cognitive Dissonance – explanations and remedies

These ideas intersect with the notion of cognitive dissonance, that is, the sustainment of ideas that are, ostensibly, in mutual contradiction. The theory has principally been used in the field of cognitive psychology and has, to Western theorists, been regarded as a puzzle or problem which demands remedy. One such theorist is Marx himself.

Within Marxist discourse, contradictions “denote a pair of forces or phenomena whose co-existence, while not logically impossible, is sustained in practice only through tension or conflict. When they become sufficiently acute, such contradictions are what provide an impetus for the forces of progress to overcome capitalism” (Sandbu, 2014).

Ironically, the term has also been used to describe the psycho-political necessities of living under communist totalitarianism⁹⁰. What it demanded is obedience to a ‘constructed’ truth which exists independent of physical reality and which may be altered for the sake of political expediency. Though one may *believe* the answer to be ‘four’, one may ‘correctly’ give the answer five, despite this contradicting what one believes to be true.

Some have sought to explain how the dissonance between language and observable facts is dealt with. He (2000) suggests that residual communist ideology is a zombie stalking political discourse in China. In his research on how dissonance affects media workers, he argues that journalists “do not feel unbearably disturbed by what they express in the public discourse universe because the hypocrisy of the Communist

⁸⁹ The precise source of this Epstein quote was unattributed in Barme’s work.

⁹⁰ Orwell’s dystopian novel, *1984*, provides the archetypal example. When Winston, the story’s protagonist, asserts that, “Two and two are four”, his interlocutor, O’Brien, responds, “Sometimes, Winston. Sometimes they are five. Sometimes they are three. Sometimes they are all of them at once” (Orwell, 2005). This idea is amusingly re-articulated in Chang’s joke about an interview for the role of chief statistician in the 1930s’ Soviet Union. “The first candidate is asked by the interview board, ‘What is two plus two, comrade?’ He answers: ‘Five’. The chairman of the interview board smiles indulgently and says: ‘Comrade, we very much appreciate your revolutionary enthusiasm, but this job needs somebody who can count.’ The second candidate’s answer is ‘Three’. The youngest member of the interview board springs up and shouts: ‘Arrest that man! We cannot tolerate this kind of counter-revolutionary propaganda, under-reporting our achievements!’ When asked the same question, the third candidate answers: ‘Of course it is four.’ The professorial-looking member of the board gives him a stern-lecture on the limitations of bourgeois science, fixated on formal logic. The fourth candidate is hired. His answer? ‘How many do you want it to be?’ (Chang, 2014: 210-211).

ideology as it has been implemented in China has made it a normal and an accepted social practice to wear a mask in public and to express what is not believed in private” (He, 2000: 608).

Moser theorises that the polarisation of discourses in China is, itself, actually a new form of control. There is strict control of the ‘official’, seen by Moser as operating largely within the news media sphere, but almost totally free-rein given to the ‘unofficial’ which, he claims, operates within a “hermetically sealed” sector. The contradictions that exist within the media between what is said to be, and what actually is, is so stark that both the journalists who produce such texts, and the audiences which consume them, internalise the contradiction as being normal. Moser suggests that these differences ultimately become invisible. The existence of two language worlds, and the gap between them, is accepted as normal and inevitable on the part of the audience (2006).

Social Ideologies and Discursive Appropriations

As Chapter 3 has discussed, the CCP is a party of mass mobilisation, one which has specifically used protest as a political tool on numerous occasions in its history. Protest is, at once, a natural and deeply embedded part of CCP ideology but also antithetical to a culturally-embedded preference for harmony.

Chapter 3 provided a summary of the literature surrounding the nature of protest in China. In this section, I outline the discursive strategies and resources available to both Party and media in dealing with episodes of unrest. Because of the control they exercise over public discourse, political and media elites have a specific role and responsibility in sustaining dominant social ideologies (Van Dijk, 1995) and discursive appropriations (Van Dijk, 2000). They are historical and culturally-constituted and may both be *exploited* and *reinforced* within media narratives. The primary discourses are: Confucianism, nationalism, developmentalism, neo-liberalism and, importantly, Marxism (Barme, 2012).

The most important discursive resource is what may be termed an underlying fear of *internal* chaos (*luan*). Those with even a cursory familiarity with the fascist governments of Hitler and Mussolini would be aware that fear has long been

identified as a resource for totalitarian regimes. However, in China's case, this fear has specific historic credence, drawing from episodes of almost cataclysmic upheaval, such as the Taiping Rebellion and the Cultural Revolution. Kuo (2013) has suggested the Chinese popular fear of chaos, and concomitant faith in the State, may be compared to the American popular fear of regimented uniformity, and the concomitant suspicion of government. These currents are, in both cases, historically and culturally founded. The realities of conflict in Chinese history, as well assumptions of congestion and over-population⁹¹, have been deployed to suggest a binary choice between Party stability and chaos.

Another of China's key "narratives" of nationhood (Barme, 2013) is one of *external exploitation*, principally at the hands of European and Japanese colonial forces. Promotion and manipulation of such views may engender support for a state which is seen to be defending national, perhaps even civilizational (Jacques, 2009), interests. Again, there is historical substance to such claims. The period beginning with the opening British salvos of the so-called Opium War in 1839 and ending with the CCP's victory over the US-backed Kuomintang government in 1949 has been dubbed the century of humiliation (*bainian guochi*) by the Party⁹². The CCP benefits from what Meng calls "historically grounded legitimacy" (2010: 502) on the basis they claim to have freed the nation from the yoke of colonialism. A China without the party would be enslaved, destitute and chaotic, hence the slogan, oft-repeated since its first use in the 1940s, "Without the Communist Party there would be no new China" (*meiyou gongchandang jiu meiyou xin zhongguo*). The peddling of such an image has been particularly vital at times when anti-foreign feeling has flared, such as protests following the 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade and major anti-Japan demonstrations in 2005 and 2012.

⁹¹ The author can anecdotally attest that among the most commonly cited responses to discussion of any given social ill in China is the argument that 'there are just too many people' (*ren tai duo*). This, of course, needs to be tempered with the knowledge that one's interlocutor may be using the phrase as a tactic to avoid forensic or political dissection of sensitive issues. Nevertheless, there appears, on the face of it, to be a sincerely held impression that China's large population has led to many undesirable-but-unavoidable phenomena.

⁹² Of course the CCP was not the first to seek to exploit perceived 'national humiliation'. Nationalism was a major component of the reform movement of the 1890s – when large parts of the country were under foreign control – and key in explaining the rise of Sun Yat-sen and his Kuomintang Party.

The 'exploitation narrative' intersects with another important discursive resource, that of *neo-liberalism*. While claiming credit for initiating, encouraging and maintaining the economic dynamism which has delivered prosperity to the nation, there is a strategic eulogising of market-based solutions. These are presented as fair and even-handed in delivering practical solutions to an ever more complex polity. This discourse, as Mishra (2014) has noted, contains "paradoxical possibilities" wherein the very success of market reform results in the emergence of a supremely wealthy elite and a kind of capitalist anarchy. Rather than undermine the Party's ideological legitimacy, the Party may be presented as the only viable counterweight to the business elite and corrupt local officials, presented as inevitable by-products of 'development'. Thus the Party is a bulwark both against *external* 'exploitation' by foreigners and *internal* 'exploitation' by the wealthy.

Confucianism as a discursive resource was buried under Mao but saw a marked resurgence under the Hu-Wen leadership. "Confucianism's position in Chinese society is equivalent to Christianity's position in Western society" (Hamilton & Zheng, 1992: 21) and, as such, touches almost every aspect of modern Chinese society. Thus it is too broad to elucidate in this short section. For the purposes of discursive potential, however, there are several particularly salient elements. Confucianism emphasises a principle of social responsibility, that is, understanding on an individual level correct and incorrect modes of behaviour. An important aspect of this is deference to established hierarchy. Even more significant is the "paternalist and welfarist" nature of the Chinese state which is engendered (Bell, 2008). This is an aspect which has risen to particular prominence in the post-Mao decline of class discourse (ibid).

Nevertheless, class discourse cannot be completely discounted. Communist ideology, or Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought, has had a profound impact on Chinese discourse and remains key to understanding political language (Boer, 2014). Though often dismissed on account of its anachronistic tenets in an era of freewheeling capitalism, China's Marxist inheritance provides a significant set of resources. Marxism carries very helpful normative expectations of promoting positive freedoms, promoting cross-class integration and spurring social economic developments (Zhao, 2012). The CCP's refusal to disavow this ideological legacy is generally taken to be little more

than a public relations sleight of hand but Marxist ideology is highly relevant to contemporary political discourse (Barme, 2012).

Contradictions may be perceived within this discursive miscellany, not least in terms of the collapsing of neo-liberalism and Marxism. However, there are also interesting intersections. We have already seen how a vision of the Party as a *defender against* capitalist exploitation may be reconciled with the vision of it as a *facilitator of* capitalist development. The Confucian and communist inheritance, similarly, collide in the emphasis on moral instruction. China's media, in particular, is tasked with ensuring its messages have a moral and ideological purity. Ideologically, the fact that the Chinese press *does*, ipso facto, perform moral duties fits didactic Confucian tradition, and Marxist-Leninist conceptions of the press.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has explained how China may be considered within broad *political* post-communist transition theories. It has argued that fragmented control, born of commercialisation and political division, challenges simplistic notions of liberal versus authoritarian frames of analysis. Within this fragmented form of authoritarianism, the Party has worked to become responsive to societal demands and, crucially, to present itself as being so. It has suggested that the Party's popularity is, in part, down to the ability of the Party to *listen* to societal currents and *respond* effectively.

The response that has been foregrounded is that of media instrumentalisation and the promulgation of core ideologies. The rise of contention in China, expressed in protest and online discourses, poses a problem. An adaptive, responsive Party-state may choose to suppress such contention but the theory introduced points to it being dealt with somewhat more openly than has been previously assumed. The press, semi-free and highly commercialised, is seen as playing a role in asserting Party control though the fragmentation of political power, as discussed above, making it hard to predict exactly how that control will be used.

This theoretical framework thus orients the reader towards the research questions which will be posed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Methodology

Introduction

This research project arose from ideas that gestated during time spent working within several corners of the Chinese media and the weight of accumulated observation over a number of years prior to the beginning of doctoral study, all of which pointed to the fact that the media landscape in China was shifting under technologically-facilitated social pressure. What began as a niche concern, however, evolved in the 2011-2012 period into something approaching a mass media staple. Barely a day went by during that period when the author did not read commentary by journalists, bloggers or scholars on the subject he had begun researching. Far from assisting in the construction of a research design, the sheer weight of information, as well as the speed of change, particularly in the online sphere, led to difficulty in establishing a clear research focus and necessitated a number of radical revisions to both the conceptualisation of the project, and the specific methods to be used. This will be explained in more detail in the 'Research Chronology' section of this chapter. This chapter will explain and justify the methods which have been used to conduct this research.

Questions, hypothesis and theoretical assumptions

Research questions

The theoretical framework sketched out in the previous chapter poses several research questions. These questions are:

Q1 (Primary Research Question): How are labour, land and environmental protest events handled in the Chinese press? What might this indicate about press function in an environment where the authorities have rescinded their monopoly on information?

Q1(a): What kind of representations are made of protestors and protest?

Q1(b): How obviously propagandized are these representations, in terms of Nationalist, Confucian, Neo-liberal and Marxist discourses?

Q1(c): Is there evidence of an interplay between discourse in online and mainstream media?

Q2: To what extent may variation and difference be observed in the mediation of protest events across the Chinese press? What might variation suggest about geographical and administrative fragmentation of political power?

Explanations

The primary research question aligns three specific areas of interest: one, the nature of Chinese press output on issues of political sensitivity; two, the nature of protest mediation in China; and three, the possible impact of online commentary and discussion in areas of political sensitivity.

The decision to locate ‘the Chinese press’ at the beginning of the research question points towards the chief focus on this research project being the performance of Chinese newspapers, as opposed to the social implications of the respective protests or the general nature of online commentary on matters of social contention. Though not disinterested in these latter two points, the research is chiefly concerned with the potential for change, or otherwise, in the performance of the official media in China.

The framing of the primary research question may appear to pre-suppose change and to pre-suppose that this change is driven by new communication technologies.

Though the project is interested in the possibility of interplay between the online coverage and mainstream press coverage, particularly in terms of politically-sensitive news stories, it is keenly aware of other potential variables which may influence the reporting of the studied protest events, and influence the nature of this interplay. It has, for example, been notable to what extent environmental pollution and corruption stories have proliferated within the press during the course of this project. While online communications may have played a role in the formation of these news tropes, it is also highly likely that these, perhaps once-sensitive, news topics are, at the least, tolerated and, at most, encouraged, as they chime with national political agendas. The research is not investigating *why* there may have been change (or no

change). Rather, it is trying to articulate *how* protest is mediated and what the nature of the change is. To have any hope of answering the *why* question, it would be necessary to conduct interviews with working news professionals in China. Any hypothetical change is, of course, likely to be a result of competing forces, with online pressure being one of many competing forces, including political and commercial pressures. These strands cannot be separated out and understood through scrutiny of the output of media texts. It is for this reason that the author has limited the research project to the initial question of *how*. It is hoped that this research will provide the foundation for future enquiries to be made which may engage working media professionals and delve more into seeking causal explanations.

Theoretical Assumptions

The questions outlined above manifest several important and interlinked theoretical assumptions. Firstly, and most obviously, that the press, in all its forms, broadly remains an instrument of the Party-state, even at its commercial fringes and even where it offers ostensibly adversarial position vis-à-vis political power. The emergence of ostensibly critical reporting, while – at the practical level – being the result of individual and collective editorial decision-making, recognises the fragmentation of power within the Party-state. An adjunct of this assumption is the idea that media workers adhere at all times to explicit red lines and tend to be highly cautious around implicit red lines. De Burgh (2003) and others have spelled out possible cultural reasons for this but ultimately it is reasonable to assume that the vast majority of those with ‘skin in the game’ (Taleb, 2012) would not be willing to risk careers and livelihoods for esoteric ideals of free expression and the Enlightenment ideals on which they are based.

Secondly, official recognition of the existence of widespread protest and consideration of legitimacy of protestor appeals is, to some extent, desirable for authorities. At a broad level it has the potential to create the veneer of accountability (see section of protest in the previous chapter). Certain tiers of government may well have a specific interest in seeing certain, limited cases of protest succeed at the local level. It is unlikely that the press will ever be saturated with stories of social contention, but it is possible to say some protest reporting will benefit some

stakeholders within China's fragmented network of political power network, some of the time. Accordingly, protest can no longer be considered a 'red line' subject but rather a topic where the utmost caution needs to be exercised by media workers.

Thirdly, in a system that has been opened up to a wider variety of public voices, censorship is increasingly concerned with management of information rather than suppression of information. Though there may remain a number of permanent red lines, most subjects are open to some degree of negotiation.

Fourthly, the press has dual political and commercial functions within the overarching project of economic growth and national revival. The press has a role in both spurring economic development through advertising (Zhao, 2008) but also being sources of revenue for the Party-state (Lee et al, 2006). Politically, the Chinese press appears increasingly important in the broad task of crisis management during an era where social contention is both widespread and public. This doesn't necessarily entail the Party dictating a version of events that absolves itself from any responsibility in times of social contention. Neither does it imply inconvenient information will inevitably be suppressed. Rather, it means the Chinese press is tasked with offering basic affirmation that complex problems can be resolved. There may be some tension between political and commercial instrumentalisation of the press but, where this is so, politics takes precedence.

Finally, despite radical changes to the media system and the wider communications environment in China, it is assumed that traditional notions concerning the importance of language in forging unity remain firmly in place (Link & Qiang, 2013).

Philosophical Assumptions

The philosophies adopted by the researcher determine the specific approaches employed in conducting research. This first section will elucidate some of the broad philosophical debates around research paradigms, and locate the author's own research within its proper philosophical context.

Positivism and post-positivism

To begin, it's useful to consider different approaches at work in the division between the physical and social sciences. The social scientist, distinct from the physical scientist, is rarely to be found consciously attempting to make a new discovery. It would of course be a gross caricature to suggest biologists, for example, spend their days searching for ground-breaking Darwinian discoveries which instantly advance human knowledge or introduce radical new paradigms; most practitioners in those fields are working on extremely niche problems which are deliberately tailored to advance knowledge fractionally. There is, however, a general sense with the discourse of physical science that practitioners are peeling back layers in a one-directional effort to get at some established, verifiable truth. Once a certain procedure or theory has gone through a certain peer-reviewed experimental process, it enters the canon and is used as a basis on which to build future projects.

Kuhn (1962) challenged this notion by arguing for the idea that scientists work within distinct 'paradigms' and, rather than relentlessly pursuing a process of incremental knowledge acquisition, are – on occasion – met with theoretical ruptures which, in a sense, 'reset' the paradigm in which they work. Though highly influential, this idea doesn't essentially change the fact that, whilst within a single paradigm, physical scientists are using a method of incremental acquisition to make 'knowledge claims' (Creswell, 2009).

This kind of approach to research and knowledge may be described as 'positivist', that is it asserts a 'value-free', 'objectivist' and 'scientific' approach which makes the key philosophical assumption that reality is there to be apprehended through experimental methodologies which seek to verify hypotheses. It takes for granted the fact that there are measurable facts which exist and that, while one must invariably introduce caveats and qualifications, these stand alone and should resist relativist interpretations.

Though a positivist approach can be, indeed *has been*, applied to social scientific methods, the latter part of the 20th century saw a distinct gap emerge between the

social and physical sciences, particularly within the European academy⁹³. A ‘post-positivist’ approach has emerged which, in its most conservative position, acknowledges the impossibility of verifying or adequately generalising one’s findings, even when there is acceptance that an objectivist reality probably *does* exist. In its more ontologically expansive definition, it takes wholly interpretive perspectives, seeing reality as being locally, perhaps even individually, constructed within frames that must pay heed to social, political, cultural, ethnic and gender differences. Ontologically, those working within a post-positivist framework are likely to agree with the notion that, within the social sciences at least, there is nothing *new* which demands discovery. Knowledge is rather a filtering of reflective and interpretive points of view, as “all observation is fallible and all theory is revisable” (Trochim, 2006). To crudely define the distinction, it would take gravity being miraculously suspended to warrant a re-examination of Newtonian physics⁹⁴ for the positivist physical scientist whereas it requires only a change in sociological perspective – something that arguably happens with every passing decade, or generation – to justify re-examination of almost any aspect of the world in the eyes of the post-positivist social scientist.

It is important to stress that post-positivism is distinct from relativism. The relativist philosophy suggests the absolute incommensurability of different perspectives. This has particular pertinence in studies concerning China, a nation which only the US can rival in claiming for itself a quasi-spiritual exceptionalism. China ‘exceptionalists’ routinely argue that Chinese society represents a web of values and conditions so paradigmatically different to others than it may only reasonably be considered in terms of itself and comes from a sociology which has sought to explain, in a granular fashion, how the Chinese see the world and their place within it⁹⁵.

This thesis rejects this form of absolute relativism. One of its primary – post-positivist – philosophical assumptions is that polities and peoples that appear quite unlike are

⁹³ Reading of a large number of research papers, produced across many different disciplines, emanating from the US suggests that American scholarly research is, in the main, guided by a positivist approach to knowledge and quantitative methods.

⁹⁴ Newtonian physics has, of course, been refined in the light of discoveries by 20th century physicists such as Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking, discoveries which may constitute a Kuhn-like paradigmatic shift in scientific exploration.

⁹⁵ See Hamilton and Zheng (1992).

never absolutely unlike. To quarantine any particular jurisdiction – be it an individual or a society – is tantamount to saying that certain peoples are a world unto themselves and therefore must necessarily remain strangers to each another. Such an approach would seem to bankrupt the entire notion of academic enquiry, founded as it is, on identifying and exploring connections and relationships. Of course, it *is* vital to consider historical, cultural, and social specificities in order to achieve measured and nuanced conclusions but China's cultural inheritance is neither simple, nor uniform, and must not be used to resist application of all non-Chinese theory.

Qualitative and quantitative methodologies

Such a distinction between positivism and post-positivism also draws into focus notions of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. What follows is an attempt to summarise the main advantages and disadvantages of both methodologies within the context of social science research, as well as the arguments made both for and against them. The author consciously introduces somewhat caricatured summaries of the respective positions, and acknowledges that there is an infinite number of qualitative or quantitative methodologies, each one potentially defensible.

The qualitative social science researcher very often, though not always, takes a 'phenomenological' approach where claims of reliable, independent, measurable 'facts' are treated with extreme scepticism. He posits that social phenomena are not reducible to countable units, that the sheer number of causal stimuli in any given situation is too varied to be incorporated into the kind of preconceived coding framework or conceptual formula preferred by quantitative researchers. Instead, he prefers to open up a research problem to interpretation and alternative perspectives. Thus, the best method for revealing such points of view is to question and observe – without precondition – to collect the data which presents itself, and then to attempt to explain the links.

In addition to merely *describing* what exists, researchers will generally seek to offer possible explanations, and it is in this process that qualitative research is most open to criticism, particularly to those from a positivist perspective. Having collected a rich sea of complex, interwoven evidence, interpretation becomes necessary, but interpretation is only possible with the imposition of an analytical framework. This

framework cannot help but be subjective and influenced, to some extent, by the researcher's own personal agenda. Researchers may deal with this problem by restricting their epistemological claims and, indeed, turn it on its head by arguing that knowledge is only possible through partiality.

Quantitative research, on the other hand, attempts to make an objective and systematic analysis and, thus, claim for itself a more 'scientific' veneer. Hypotheses are made against which a sample can be tested⁹⁶. These must necessarily be randomly drawn but, critically, must be representative of a given population (of people) or field (of, say, TV programmes or newspaper articles). These samples are then scanned for the presence of certain coded phenomena and against, usually, two or more coded variables, with the results being recorded statistically. These results are generally intended to be representative, generalizable and, thus, reliable.

The chief objection to this method is the impossibility of accurately reducing sociological phenomena into countable units defined, often, in binary terms. If one is looking for positivist evidence of, for example, violence in TV soap operas, one must define 'violence' in a way that every reader of that research can agree with. From the point of view of the qualitative research, such a process inevitably elides complex strands of understanding. In its effort to make all its constituent concepts conform to standardised 'units', quantitative research generates poorly nuanced results. Moreover, the research is conditioned by the specific hypothetical questions that are posed at the outset. By designing one's methods in a certain way, the quantitative researcher may load the dice in favour of a certain outcome.

Both qualitative and quantitative researchers face what may be described as the 'Icarus Dilemma', that is to say, the richness of one's findings are very often dependent on proximity to one's intended subject, and this proximity may distort the way one views the results. This notion is well established within the physical sciences as the 'observer effect', which suggests that the very act of observation and measurement may fundamentally change what is being observed and measured. Walker, a chemist, observes that "one of the lessons of [physical] science is that it's actually quite hard to study something without changing it, but it's quite hard to be

⁹⁶ Hypotheses may, of course, also be used in qualitative research

on the earth without changing the earth or being changed, because we are part of the ecosystem” (2012). Frayn makes a similar point from the perspective of a social scientist:

When you are in motion relative to your subject it's very difficult to get into contact with it. You see it passing the window of the car or the train and it's very difficult to lay your hands on it. ...It's very difficult to seize the world around you...whether you are looking at it, or listening to it...partly because you can only have a relationship, with even the most static objects, in time...You see very little at any one moment. The eye focuses on a very tiny part of the scene. It's just that the eye keeps darting around and the brain puts together all the different bits you've seen and compares that with some idea you have of the subject and makes some kind of idea in your head out of it, but your actual physical relationship with the world around you is extremely fleeting and partial. (2013)

It is crucial to stress that there is no consensus on the scientific character of either form of social science research. It must be admitted that manipulations and reductions take place in both methods; by definition, it is necessary to manipulate a topic in some form or other in order to make it researchable. However, one can hope to mitigate the distorting effects of this in a number of ways, most obviously, through a reflexive process whereby the researcher, as far as possible, is cautious in presenting one's own findings and draws attention to the areas in which the research could, potentially, have been compromised. In such a situation, the social science researcher can do no more than justify one's own standpoint and draw attention to one's own limitations. The 'limitations' section of the final chapter marks the beginning of this process.

Orientation to the philosophical context of this research project

The discussion so far in this section has moved from an extremely broad philosophical view of epistemology and ontology to discussion of very general research methodologies in the context of social science research. This particular research

project is located in the field of media and communications which can claim unto itself yet another set of methodological and epistemological conundrums.

Media research may be said to have moved through four broad phases since its inception as a distinct scholarly discipline in the 1960s⁹⁷ (Couldry, 2014). The first was a focus on textual analyses, conducted to discern inherent and potentially hidden meaning. The second concerned itself with political economy and focused on questions of media ownership and media instrumentalisation by politics and business. Both strands made unverified assumptions around the effects of media texts. Thus, in the 1990s, a corrective emerged which examined how audiences read and understood texts. The most recent paradigm, which shows signs of evolving again (ibid), is focused on how media is *used* at the level of the individual to serve a set of specific social and psychological needs.

This research embraces a linear approach to communications that has largely been supplanted in the Western context. That is, it focuses on the *messages* within Chinese media texts and assumes that authorial meanings are largely fixed. It does not seek to question whether the audiences which consumed those texts read the messages in the way intended. It adopts an entirely qualitative case study methodology and makes no claims to representative or generalizable findings. In this sense, this research project is grounded somewhere between the two extremes delineated above. It may be said that I adopt an epistemologically post-positivist approach (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, quoted in Bertrand & Hughes, 2005: 10) which seeks 'objectivist' (ibid) knowledge within a realistic ontological framework, while acknowledging the impossibility of perfect verification, as well as the inherent subjectivity of the research methodology.

Reflexivity

As hinted above, reflexivity represents a partial solution to the problems outlined here. Put simply, reflexivity demands researchers make "a consideration of the practice of research, our place within it and the construction of our fields of enquiry themselves" (May, 2011: 44). This is done to demonstrate an awareness that the

⁹⁷ Specialist departments of media and communications first began to appear in the 1960s though media texts had, obviously, been subject to scholarly research before then.

researcher can never unproblematically reflect social reality by producing “data without theory” or by positing “theory without data” (ibid: 43). That is to say, reflexivity demands the researcher critically reflects on his position within the social milieu in which the research is embedded. Reflexivity is a crucial method for guarding against that “scholastic fallacy” (Bourdieu, 2000, cited in May, 2011: 43) in which the researcher is assumed to be a neutral vessel, devoid of presupposition or prejudice, in a process of converting raw data into theory and, eventually, canonical truth. It is a means of guarding against what is known in the physical sciences as the aforementioned observer effect. Reflexivity is not an admission of the hopelessness of reflecting reality because of entrenched biases, but rather is a means of questioning, demonstrating an epistemological awareness of the nature of knowledge production.

Reflexivity is a particular concern in a multi-disciplinary subject such as media and communications, which borrows both methods and theory from several different fields (Hansen et al, 1998). Results can be, and are, found to support any viewpoint. This makes verifiability difficult to achieve. One possible response of the post-positivist researcher is to offer limited conclusions which recognise areas of weakness and which do not pretend to say more than they do. Reworking questions to take media away from being the centre of the subject is one possible response (ibid) and one taken by this research project.

In the spirit of reflexivity, the following section delineates the way in which the study evolved chronologically and highlights changes to basic conceptions as well as the methods that were to be employed. To pretend the research design, as it is articulated later in this chapter, emerged, fully formed, after a period of hermetic isolation would be dishonest and, more importantly, unfaithful to the principles of reflexivity spelled out above.

Research Chronology

This section will summarise the way in which the project has changed over its duration and provide an explanation for these changes. It is a personal narrative and, as such, is written in the first-person.

My spur to doctoral work was excitement around newly developing Internet technologies, in particular the then-new microblog platforms. I wondered how they may impact journalism in China, and by extension the Chinese 'public sphere', and whether there may be an interplay developing between mainstream media and online communications. Both my research proposal and my early pieces of written work were concerned with notions of how Chinese journalists were exploiting online platforms for research and reporting and what this might say about political change in China.

My initial assumption was drawn from a transitological frame, though this was not consciously recognised at the time. The idea which undergirded my thinking was that unidirectional change was taking place in China, driven by technological development. Citizens who had previously been shut out of public communication were asserting bottom-up pressure through web-based platforms, a phenomenon which offered journalists both personal succour and professional justification for expanding the reach of their own printed reportage. Thus my initial research occupied a frame in which the underlying theoretical conception was of a retreating state and an advancing demos, with journalists assuming a pivotal role in mediating this confrontation. My initial working hypothesis was that 'self-restraint' on the part of editors and journalists, a lynchpin of the censorship regime in China, would be undermined by the rise of social media.

Such a conception oriented me towards literature on the democratising potential of web technologies; ideas of agenda-setting; concepts of journalist professionalism; and research on media control in the Chinese context. It also pointed towards a methodology which prioritised qualitative interviews with working journalists and, importantly, an attempt to quantify the scale of the journalistic crossover between mainstream and online sources.

Because of this initial conception of a binary, and antagonistic, relationship between state and society, I was concerned to probe areas of online reporting and mainstream coverage in what I termed 'politically sensitive' subjects and analyse the battle between a repressive state seeking to control the flow of information, and a restive society seeking greater access to information.

This conception generated two methodological conundrums that proved hugely problematic as I began to design my research in my first and second years of study. Firstly, aware of the invasive censorship practices of regional and national propaganda departments, as well as commercial organisations bound to propaganda guidelines, I attempted to yield data in real-time from the Chinese web, capturing comments and discussions before they were removed from public view. Secondly, in order to capture such data, it was necessary to arrive at a deductive list of ‘sensitive’ story subjects, both in the online and offline (press) spheres, which led to a prolonged effort to search both literature and contemporary non-academic sources for clues as to what could be construed as perennially ‘sensitive’ to Chinese politics.

A good deal of time was spent investigating the possibility of making quantitative comparisons between online and offline news sources and looking for agenda flows between online microblogs and official publications. I attempted to design a methodology which looked for correlations between online trending lists and mainstream press agenda, comparing them against core variables that took into effect commercial and political considerations such as a newspaper’s advertising revenue or its political ‘managing institutions’⁹⁸. This necessitated taking a quantitative approach and a reductionist strategy where stories about, say, food safety scandals or political corruption were measured in binary units – either they were present in newspapers or they were not – with scant regard to their treatment.

Such an endeavour generated theoretical and methodological problems. Theoretically, it became clear that my ‘liberation-control’ framework misconceived the Chinese state as monolithic, and misrepresented the politically-minded online community as representative of, one, all online discourse, and, two, Chinese society in general. Methodologically, I gradually realised that I had grossly underestimated the dynamism of online censorship practices at the same time as overestimating my own ability to capture and process real-time data. I also failed to properly grasp that, beyond a few well-defined tropes such as Falun Gong and June 4th 1989, the scope of ‘sensitive’ subjects was very fluid. That is to say, sensitivity was defined, and redefined on a daily – sometimes even an hourly – basis. Along similar lines, I became

⁹⁸ This administrative arrangement is discussed in more detail on page 42.

aware of the fact that the microblog itself was subject to debate among the political elite in China who, it may be reasonable asserted, saw in the technology both potential *and* threat. During the period in which I was conducting early fieldwork, both the Party-state and microblog providers appeared to be in a process of negotiating the theoretical and practical implications of *weibo*⁹⁹ and thus were revising and refining policy and control techniques, making any survey of the field very problematic. Finally, I overestimated the amount of ostensibly ‘sensitive’ content in the Chinese press. Though there were episodes of great interest, to garner sufficient data for a comprehensive quantitative analysis, I would have needed to have expanded the definition of ‘sensitive’ so much that it would have compromised the intellectual rigour of the research.

Finding myself at a dead-end, and having expended much time in exploring statistical analytical tools and developing coding sheets, I attempted a solution which took me even farther into that same blind alley by spending weeks pursuing the idea of systematically testing censorship practices across a range of microblog platforms, using a methodology tested by MacKinnon (2008) on static blog pages in which a list of sensitive keywords were deductively generated and input into Chinese blogs in an effort to test the gatekeeping mores of web censors. Though the nature and methods of censorship on the Chinese web is certainly of interest, I realised that it would have taken me further from my professed focus on Chinese journalism and also would have likely yielded no new findings. There is now considerable literature, primarily emanating from those with computer science backgrounds, probing the mechanisms and logic of online censorship. It is, for example, well-established that online censorship in China is extensive, broadly dispersed between different agencies, and subject to daily changes (Mackinnon 2009; Bamman et al, 2012; Yu et al, 2012; Zhu et al, 2013).

During this early period, a lack of physical separation between ‘the field’ and my place of study compromised and confused my theoretical focus. In some senses, I was in ‘the field’ from almost the first day of my PhD study. I was able to observe trends on microblogs and scan Chinese newsprint for corresponding articles using my PC. Some

⁹⁹ *Weibo* literally means ‘mini-blog’ in Chinese and may be used generically, as in this instance, or used to refer specifically to the most celebrated microblog platform, Sina Weibo.

of my early, but ultimately discontinued, work including compiling daily, half-daily and hourly listings of trending topics using Sina Weibo's data and downloading entire PDF copies of my sample newspapers, looking for correlations between popular online topics and news agendas. While this process helped to familiarise me with online technologies and provided bountiful pointers for possible research directions, it blurred the methodologically important line between preparatory work and fieldwork. It also led to a situation where – with hindsight – I felt as if I was chasing a shadow: one supposedly significant development was usurped by another, then another. All the while, my expected findings never quite materialised. My early writings were those of a journalist, not a scholar: often descriptive and speculative, with the focus shifting from day to day as new information and ideas emerged. In short, this period provided for me a fascinating but painful lesson in the need for a having a clear approach and research design before one steps into the field.

The frustration of constantly pursuing the new led, in large part, to my decision to reorient my focus. At the practical level, I wanted to examine historic events that had, essentially, worked their way through the various censorship mechanisms – in both the online and mainstream sphere – and were thus relatively 'settled' as a matter of public record. As such, they could be studied in a qualitative manner, without the need for collection of enormous amounts of data. This presented a partial solution to the issue of the rate of change and my inability to *capture* that change in a sufficiently rigorous way.

In terms of precisely *what* to study, I turned towards the subject of protest. This had inductive, rather than theoretical, roots. At the end of my first year of study, in late July and early August 2011, there were two major news events which exemplified the online-offline news flow I was interested in studying. The first was the crash between two high-speed trains near Wenzhou, on China's east coast, which led to a flurry of online and press commentary, much of it highly antagonistic towards the Party-State. The second was a major protest in the prosperous northern coastal city of Dalian concerning the siting of a chemical factory. The two events, though very different, involved issues of online contention and provoked apparently very different media responses. This alerted me both to the special 'sensitivity' of protest in the Chinese

context, and the fact that protest reporting was now a feature within the Chinese press. This inductive discovery subsequently led to an exploration of the considerable literature around social contention and protest in China. Thus I began to channel my focus from vague notions of looking at anything 'sensitive' online, to a strict and much more workable focus on the specific issue of 'protest'.

The reorientation of my focus also had implications for the theoretical framework in which I was developing my research design. While the reporting around the Wenzhou rail crash appeared to send a signal that mainstream journalists were adopting an increasingly adversarial position, the sudden cessation of reporting on the issue, combined with the effectiveness with which the Dalian story was eliminated from mainstream news sources a few weeks later suggested that the press, and online media, remained firmly under the control of central and local propaganda departments. The incidence of protest reporting and online discussion thus took on a different theoretical hue: rather than seeing these phenomena as evidence of a significant shift in systemic relations between the State, society and the media, they appeared to indicate a process of what Sparks terms 'functional adaptation' (2010) of the media to a new media reality. This necessitated a paradigmatic shift in my conception of the entire project, seeing the possibility that change may equally be a directed, top-down process rather than one which comes from the bottom-up. Rather than see the press as a site for negotiation, it became an arena for the strategic implementation of communication techniques. What role, I began to wonder, did the press now take in mediating, moderating and ultimately controlling the threat of public protest.

Methodologically, this reorientation had implications for *how* I went about collecting qualitative data. For a long time I was concerned to conduct interviews with working journalists. However, my new conception of the project logically meant I was no longer concerned with precisely what conceptions journalists had about their role in the communicative flow. What I was concerned about was the qualitative nature of what they produced for public consumption. By focusing in on social contention and making the assumption – born of literature and this preliminary fieldwork – that, in this narrow field at least, the press plays a strategic role in social integration,

assimilating competing ideologies, and setting the boundaries for discourse around contentious issues, sociological perspectives on journalistic 'role-perception' or 'professional practice' appeared irrelevant.

The research design thus began to assume the character with which it is presented here. However, even at this stage I was primarily focused on the question of how the development of the *online sphere* in China was generating change in the mainstream press, even if I began to be convinced this was a case of structural adaptation rather than the result of a negotiated outcome between journalists, voices from civil society and the state. As such, conducting a systematic analysis of online debate appeared an equally important task to the analysis of mainstream media output.

However, this continued to cause methodological confusions. Through my second year of research, I continued to struggle to find a suitable methodology for handling large quantities of online data in a sufficiently rigorous qualitative manner, suspecting that a quantitative analysis would yield very little on account of the enormous technical expertise being brought to bear in terms of censorship. Once again, I came to the conclusion that, in order to clarify, I needed to reorient my focus onto print journalism, whilst being mindful of links to online discussion which may be pursued in a non-systematic manner. In a sense, this reinforced the theoretical reorientation detailed above. Rather than searching for evidence of print being *changed* by online commentary, I became concerned primarily with how the Chinese press was *responding* to online in the area of protest reporting. My focus was, therefore, less about the 'interplay' between the two spheres, and more about press adaptation in an age where, manifestly, online platforms provide an alternative source of information for the citizenry.

This section has summarised this research project's radical shift in focus over the first two years of research. These changes may be defined in four ways, each of which represents a narrowing and a simplification of the research idea: firstly, the project has shifted in its temporal focus from *contemporary* events to *historic* (albeit recent) subjects; secondly, it has shifted in its theoretical focus from a *sociological* inquiry into journalistic practice to a *political* inquiry into press function; thirdly, it has shifted in terms of its object of study, from a concern with *online contention* and towards a

focus on *press performance*; and finally, it has moved away from an effort to collect *representative, quantitative data* to a more *qualitative* and necessarily subjective approach.

It also entailed a radical revision of my theoretical frame, from one rooted in the control-versus-liberation paradigm to one of political communications and governance in China. This understands that the press remains a *potential* tool of the Party-state and though the space for journalism is expanded, nothing may evolve which has not been permitted, if not explicitly willed, by the Party-state.

I do not seek to deny the potential for change in the Chinese media or to deny the potential influence from individual journalists, editors or institutions. However, the approach taken recognises that “the engine of innovation and change comes largely from within the CCP” (Cao, 2012: 142) and makes the assumption that any change observed serves a purpose that is ultimately in the interests of Party-state, or at least a subsection of the Party-state, however murkily that interest may be externally perceived.

Methods

Orientation

Qualitative research is largely an investigative process used to understand a particular social situation. The researcher is tasked with gradually making sense of a social phenomenon by contrasting, comparing, cataloguing and classifying the object of study (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Though a problem may be raised by qualitative analyses, theories to explain every facet of that problem are not established a priori.

As the Research Chronology, above, makes clear, there is huge difficulty in studying the internal processes of such an inherently chaotic and mutable object as the Chinese press. To resolve this, I decided to focus not only on press output but only on certain aspects of Chinese press reporting. In making this decision, I accept that my findings cannot reveal anything about Chinese press behaviour as a whole, but rather seeks to demonstrate *how* different parts of the Chinese press perform in their approach to a specific issue of vital social and political importance.

Research design

This research utilises a comparative case study research design and a qualitative content analysis method to explore the way in which different sections of the Chinese press reported three different protest events during the Hu-Wen era in China¹⁰⁰, a period during which Chinese communications were radically altered by new online technologies. The *mediation* of protest is the primary unit of analysis rather than the *realities* of the issues surrounding the protest itself. As such, the research thrust of this project has a different focus than the extant academic literature on protest in China (Cai, 2010; O'Brien, 2009; Fewsmith, 2008; Perry, 2001; Hung, 2011).

Case studies

As has been explained above, this research was initially predicated on the idea of conducting systematic sampling of press output around politically 'sensitive' protest events. However, the episodic and unpredictable nature of political interference in media and culture in China dooms any attempt to deliver representative samples, particularly in an area such as protest. As such, a case study approach has been adopted. There are obvious limitations to this – a lack of representativeness and the impossibility of drawing reproducible findings, most obviously. However, as Kumar argues, examining purposively drawn cases "is extremely useful when you want to...develop something about which only a little is known" (2005: 179) – such as the way protest is mediated in China's modern press.

Each case was selected precisely because the events generated some degree of domestic and overseas media coverage, or academic interest. Their very presence in news pages is the reason for their inclusion – this is a necessarily first condition if one wishes to study media representations – but the research is careful not to make judgements about *why* they received media coverage, or to assume that similar events must necessarily generate identical responses.

Each case also reflects a different category of social contention: environmental protest; urban labour; and land requisition. Chapter Three has pointed to the

¹⁰⁰ Taken to mean the 2003-2013 period during which Hu Jintao acted as General Secretary of the CCP and President of the PRC, and Wen Jiabao, in his capacity as Premier of the State Council, acted as the head of government.

emergence of specific *genres* of social contention in modern China. The above categories are only three of perhaps a dozen. However, they are among the most widespread and widely discussed. All three categories have, to some extent, been recognised in official discourse as legitimate social problems and so official reporting, though highly circumspect and carefully controlled, is not only possible but likely to increase in coming years. Environmental concern has grown across China over the last decade and the issue is widely discussed, particularly around the subject of air pollution¹⁰¹. Labour agitation is not the stuff of daily politics or news coverage but there is a focus on some of the social problems associated with migration for the purposes of urban labour, principally graduate unemployment, *hukou* reform and property prices. Forcible land requisition, the subject of the third protest, is absolutely central to the modern Chinese economy, and a source of wealth creation and government revenue. “China’s economic progress of the past 30 years is in large part the trick of conjuring private wealth out of communal property. Winners and losers have been determined by who got the land and how much they paid for it” (Pilling, 2012). These issues provide a challenge to officials in every province. Perhaps most importantly, they are obviously subject to conflicting explanations and debate.

This research project thus seeks to analyse the mediation of protest events that involve vital issues of governance and which are subject to competing claims which may be seen as legitimate within China’s current governing framework, but which have *not* been so existentially troubling to central leadership for them to be considered ‘red-line’ events¹⁰². Such events are less likely to attract competing ideological claims and, because of the extreme political sensitivity, less likely to generate media coverage, which obviously renders them ill-suited to a media-focused project such as this.

The very fact of mass street protest is critical in explaining why these case studies have been selected. The mere existence of protest means political sensitivity, and

¹⁰¹ This is most obvious in the relatively widespread media discussion of PM2.5, a particulate that is particularly deleterious for human health.

¹⁰² ‘Red-line’ events are newsworthy incidents of high political sensitivity where a Chinese journalist or editor would understand instinctively that he or she would be ‘crossing a line’ by reporting upon it without explicit political supervision. Recent red line *protest* events include the Tibetan uprising in March 2008 and the *Southern Weekend* journalist strike in January 2013.

thus political instrumentalisation, may be assumed, something which is not possible in less extreme or sensational cases. Of course, the research cannot assume the precise source of that instrumentalisation, only that it will adhere in large part to the wishes of political masters. This is critical, and this justifies why these specific case studies were chosen.

The methods employed here do not afford a forensic examination of *why* the issue became established, or claims of causality. Rather they help to examine how the issue appeared on the public screen and analyse how the issues are represented within different parts of the press. This analysis occurs within a framework which assumes the presence of a political propaganda strategy.

Why newspapers?

The press is China's first mass-medium and continues to occupy a privileged position in the media pantheon, despite the competition posed by radio, television and the internet. Its privilege is political; newspapers are an elite media, control of which is necessary to influence elite politics in China (Ke, 2010: 43). Television can perhaps claim to be "the most influential medium shaping China's rapidly forming market society" (Zhao, 2012: 159-60), but it is "highly print based and verbal oriented, rather than image driven, and it displays a high level of synergy with the press in terms of content" (ibid). In other words, in terms of political news, newspapers remain central.

In a political environment where there is little transparency over the formal deliberations and decision-making processes of elite politics, newspapers have long been seen as a window into the opaque world of Chinese politics. Reading the signs have, over time, involved varying degrees of Kremlinological skill – "The art of interpreting non-existent inscriptions written in invisible ink on a blank page" in the memorable words of Leys (2013) – but what is clear is that the signs have often been writ in newsprint first. "The Chinese media under CCP control have been highly constitutive of political struggles...and of fundamental theoretical and policy debates over the direction of Chinese society" (Zhao, 2012). This project is interested in the interaction between politics and media. Newspapers represent the media form that is closest to political power and, as such, are of the greatest interest when searching for data.

This thesis is keen to do more than analyse content on the assumption of media uniformity, which leads to the second major reason that newspapers have been selected. More than TV and radio, newspapers exemplify the ostensible threats to control cited in the second chapter: Chinese newsprint is highly commercialised, fragmented, and increasingly devolved from central power. It is thus more likely than other media to be a site of political and social contention. The popularity of TV has made it subject to tighter central control and scrutiny (Zhao, 2008) and perhaps explains why it is a cacophonous forum for entertainment and commerce.

Newspapers, by contrast, have an historically-constituted role as 'elite media' (Ke, 2010: 43) and thus let in more political light. If one assumes that this light may be reflected, refracted and diffuse because of the complexities of modern China, it makes it all the more pressing to study newspapers rather than more uniformly controlled and more commercially-focused media.

Protest Events

The three protest events selected for this thesis will be discussed and analysed in separate chapters and presented in chronological order.

The research will begin by examining the reporting around an urban protest march against the siting of a peroxolyne plant. Peroxolyne – or PX – is a carcinogenic benzene derivative used in the manufacture of polyester. The protest occurred in Xiamen in early June 2007 after a period of online and offline contention and media discussion. Protestors were drawn from a number of constituencies but may be characterised as chiefly urban, relatively affluent and professional. This protest may be characterised as *Urban Environmental Protest*.

The thesis will go on to examine reporting around a city-wide taxi strike that took place in November 2008 in the southwest city of Chongqing. The protestors comprised urban workers¹⁰³ who appeared to organise along informal industrial lines. The incident involved drivers not only withdrawing labour but also taking to the streets in their cars to protest at what they saw as unfair terms by those who

¹⁰³ Though participating taxi drivers may be said to be urban labourers and residents, many would undoubtedly be migrant workers who came to Chongqing from different parts of China.

managed and regulated their industry. This protest may be characterised as *Urban Labour Protest*.

Finally, the research looks at reporting around a rural protest event concerning the alleged illegal requisition of communally-owned farming land. This took place in Wukan, a large village in the affluent southern province of Guangdong, between September and December 2011. Tensions escalated over several months, punctuated by short-lived episodes of physical violence against government property and workers. The final and most vociferous protest took place after the death in custody of one of the protest organisers. This protest may be characterised as *Rural Land Protest*.

Some have characterised “Anticorruption” as a specific protest genre (Perry & Seldon, 2000: 2). It could, however, be seen as a theme which forms a general backdrop to almost *all* modern protest in China¹⁰⁴. For example, in the case of the three events cited above, anti-corruption is an explicit issue in the second and third protest, but is also related to the first, involving, as it does, political manoeuvring and opaque business deals.

The research is principally interested in representations of the protest *itself* but also considers the manner in which the issues that directly precipitated the protest were covered by Chinese media. Thus, features and editorials which directly reference the ostensible *cause* of a protest event are also included within the analytical ambit, even if they do not refer directly to the protest itself.

It is important to reiterate that this research is not attempting to compare the reporting to ‘reality’ in the way a content analysis might (Bertrand & Hughes, 2005: 175). Nor is it attempting to understand how texts might be read. The media texts themselves are the singular core of the analysis.

Core Newspapers

Case studies generally seek to attract as much contextual data as possible and rarely rule out potentially helpful sources of data. Accordingly, this study considers potential data from all mainland Chinese newspaper sources. However, in seeking to assess potential *differences* between various parts of the Chinese press, some tentative

¹⁰⁴ Only in religious and inter-ethnic protests may corruption be seen to be an irrelevance.

structural delineations are made to the analytical frame. Accordingly, this research makes some of the same assumptions of traditional content analysis research which – as Krippendorff puts it – “assesses the differences in messages generated by two communicators, by one source in two different situations [and] differences in audiences addressed” (2004: 37).

In scrutinising media output connected with the three protest events cited above, particular focus will be given to specific publications and newspaper groups. These are: the *People's Daily* (*renmin ribao*), the flagship newspapers of the Southern Media Group (the *Southern Metropolis Daily* [*nanfang dushibao*], *Southern Weekend* [*nanfang zhoumo*] and the *Southern Daily* [*nanfang ribao*]), the *Oriental Morning Post* (*dongfang zaobao*), and the weekly news magazine *Caijing*. Additionally, close attention is paid to both Party and commercial publications *local* to the specific protest event.

As has been discussed in Chapter 2, literature points towards divisions within the Chinese press (Zhao, 2008: 81). The core newspapers above represent the three main genres that can be said to exist in the modern Chinese press – the Party press, the metropolitan commercial press and the elite business press. They also reflect potential power delineation along a further axis, that of geography. These newspapers and newspaper groups are drawn from Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, three first-tier cities which each have their own political distinction.

The research is aware of the complex ecology of the Chinese media landscape, which, much like China's political bureaucracy, transcends a number of conflicting and competing power interests (Tong, 2008). The core newspapers vary slightly in the seniority of their political affiliation. One has political affiliations to the top echelons of the Party, while the others have provincial level affiliation. Local newspapers, in turn, are likely to have local political affiliations, though specifics are discussed within the relevant chapters.

To discuss each core newspaper in slightly more detail, the *People's Daily*, based in Beijing, is a so-called organ (*jiguan*) of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It has played a central role in articulating political upheaval since 1949: editorials in the newspaper were key in marshalling the Hundred Flowers

Campaign and the Great Leap Forward (Scotten & Hachten, 2010: 43). In the post-Mao era, hostility to student demonstrators in 1989 was provided by a *People's Daily* editorial on April 26th of that year which labelled protest a "planned conspiracy" (Schell & Delury, 2013: 307). Confirmation of Deng Xiaoping's later victory over the leftist pushback against marketization was signalled in the *People's Daily* (ibid: 321).

Though its journalists have perhaps the least scope for operating independently of political oversight, the *People's Daily* is a worthy point of reference in any comparative analysis as it is regarded as being the most direct window possible into the opinions of national leadership. It is different from the others in this core sample in that it is not hard-news oriented. Its core audience are Party officials at various levels within the administrative hierarchy and, as such, its output is highly ideological, didactic, and moralising. News stories often have the feel of editorials and where hard news is concerned, exposition of a story is often minimal.

The Southern Media Group is connected to the provincial leadership in Guangdong, China's richest and most politically, socially and economically 'open' province (explicable by historic, cultural and geographic factors). Reflecting this, its flagship commercial daily, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* has a reputation for challenging and, occasionally, adversarial reporting. Its stable-mate, the *Southern Weekend* is a weekly publication renowned for its investigative, long-form reporting and takes a similar editorial stance.

The *Oriental Morning Post* is a business-focused morning newspaper published by one of the most commercially powerful media conglomerates in China, the Wenhui Xinmin United Press Group. It is published in Shanghai.

Caijing is a national weekly news magazine with a strong business focus. It was founded in 1998. Though it has an explicitly business orientation, it carries in-depth stories on a variety of subjects, from media to military issues. Unlike the newspapers in this sample, the magazine does not have direct administrative oversight by provincial or ministerial level government bodies. Its official identity is that of a corporate newsletter and therefore it avoids a direct connection to governmental oversight. *Caijing* has an English-language edition.

Beyond these core newspapers, miscellaneous reports in other corners of the Chinese news media will be brought into the frame of analysis assuming they offer something substantially different to what is found in the core sample.

As Krippendorff argues, “[a]nything connected with the phenomena of interest qualifies as data for content analysis” (1980: 171). Accordingly, news stories, feature stories, editorials, op-eds, as well as online postings that appear on platforms which carry the imprimatur of the news organisation are considered. Articles may be analysed even if they do not appear in the printed newspaper itself.

Data Collection

Stories were searched for through a variety of methods. The vast majority of Chinese newspapers, including all the core newspapers in this project, publish online versions of their publications. These are available to download in PDF format. The primary method of data collection was, therefore, to download the entire newspapers for two weeks either side of the protest event in order to scan for press output which referenced, either directly or obliquely, the themes of the event.

There were times where online versions were not available. In these instances, the researcher conducted domain and date-specific searches for relevant editorial copy. This sometimes led to the identification of particular stories which could then be accessed through web-based text version rather than the original newsprint version. This occasionally meant it was not possible to verify that headlines and images matched the published output.

The majority of stories indicated whether the story appeared in the newspaper or only on the newspaper’s website. Occasionally, a story did not appear in routine search engine results but was found to exist thanks to references in blogs or other online postings. In these instances, it was possible to find a copy of the relevant article, though this was not always sourced from the news outlet’s own website. The vibrancy of the online sphere in China means that stories considered politically interesting are very often cut and pasted in their entirety onto personal websites for distribution and comment. A handful of stories in the bibliography came from this method.

Methods of Analysis

This study is interested in what Reah (1998) distinguishes as both the ‘representation of groups’ involved in protest, as well as the ‘discourses’ that surround both the protest itself and the issues from which the social contention arose. Ultimately, both are to some extent interested in how “language devices are used...to create and ideological stance’ (Reah, 1998: 110). In this respect, the project takes a broad view of content analysis as it is interested in language, narrative structure, typology, framing, and how images are utilised.

The project is also specifically interested in the manner in which news output makes reference to, response to, or citation of, online, non-official sources of information or commentary. Though the structural and linguistic devices that are used are of interest in this effort, more relevant is Atkinson and Coffey’s notion of ‘intertextuality’ (1997: 56). Under their conception:

...the realm of documentary reality does not rely on particular documents mirroring and reflecting a social reality. Rather, we think of a semi-autonomous domain of documentary reality, in which documents reflect and refer (often implicitly) to other documents.” (ibid).

The research is interested in the ‘documentary reality’ of the representation of protest in China, not for what it says *per se* about the issues behind social contention or the descriptions given of the ‘social world’ (ibid: 61) but for what it says about the world constructed within media texts, subject to the conventions of that particular reality. “Rather than ask whether an account is true, or whether it can be used as ‘valid’ evidence about a research setting, it is more fruitful to ask ourselves questions about the form and functions of the text themselves” (ibid). Put slightly differently, the premise of this work is “that media content is not so much a secondary reflection as an artefact and a practice in which society is both reproduced and contested” (Schroder, 2002: 100).

Because Chinese newspaper reporting on sensitive subjects such as protest, or indeed the issues that may generate social contention, is well known to employ a peculiar and non-natural ‘official’ register (Link, 2013a) with roots back to Maoist times, language and linguistics is a concern of this study. As such, the project is concerned to

conduct what Deacon, Pickering and Murdoch refer to loosely as a form of “media linguistic analysis” (2007: 150). The application of linguistics to the study of media texts, they argue, “has been most significant in helping to show the various ways in which media language use embodies relations of power and authority in society” (ibid). As Bertrand and Hughes point out, such kinds of analyses lend themselves to small samples which need not be representative (2005: 187), they seem to fit well in an area where data is not particularly abundant.

The author’s linguistic analysis relies on a framework proposed by Link (2013), Davis (2013) and others, discussed in Chapter 4, which draws a distinction between *official* and *unofficial* modes of communication. Link argues that Chinese media nearly always uses ‘official Chinese’, which may be defined within five different categories of linguistic analysis, explained in the previous chapter. This largely linguistic framework can be merged with one that fits more comfortably in the realm of communications research, that proposed by van Dijk, which uses many of the same linguistic categories to form what he calls a ‘discourse structure’ which, in term, expresses an ‘ideology’. Van Dijk notes the importance of lexical items, propositions, implications, presuppositions, descriptions, local and global coherence, and semantic moves and explains how these may be ‘integrated’ within a text to construct an ideology (Van Dijk, 1998: 31-40).

In this merging, the author hopes to marry an analysis of the linguistic elements of the sampled media texts with the discourse they may reveal. Discourse, Cook says, is “not concerned with language alone. It also examines the context of communication: who is communicating with whom and why; in what kind of society and situation, through what medium; how different types of communication evolved, and their relationship to each other (Cook, 1992, cited in Bell & Garrett, 1998: 3).

In summary, the analysis is concerned to consider structural aspects of news texts, and their relationship with other texts. At this level of analysis, in addition to linguistic elements cited by Link and van Dijk above, the research will consider newspaper headlines, captions, and ledes; the ordering of topics and quotation patterns, utilising Bell’s tools of ‘discourse structure’. These, Bell argues, can tell us “a lot about the character of the stories – indications of how they were made, evidence of

discrepancies and gaps, and manifestations of the news values behind them” (Bell, 1998: 101). In addition to probing what is present, the analysis will question what is missing from news texts. Identifying absences can be as useful as identifying presences if the absence might have been expected, or predicted, by theory.

This analysis relies on a broad understanding of qualitative content analysis, and will, where relevant, use some of the tools of structure, narrative, semiotic, framing and discourse analysis without being allied exclusively with any one in particular.

Limitations of design

This study is intended to be a *cross-sectional* study of the mediation of Chinese protest at a specific historical juncture. The case studies are, importantly, delineated according to protest type and geographical location – in other words, they were protests about different things that took place in different places. However, they are linked by fact of mass street protest, mainstream media involvement, and the use among protestors of online technologies. The most critical unifying factors is that all three protest events occurred during a single, coherent political period of national leadership under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao.

The author recognises the possibility of a *longitudinal* element being interjected into the analysis on the basis of two debateable liminalities. The first is the transition between the 16th and 17th Party Congresses in October 2007¹⁰⁵ and the second the emergence of highly-social Web 2.0 technologies at approximately the same time¹⁰⁶. These two evolutions did undoubtedly influence a new propaganda strategy, introduced early in the 17th Party Congress in March 2008, which detailed a move away from ‘public opinion guidance’ towards ‘public opinion channelling’¹⁰⁷. This is interpreted as being a reaction to the challenges of controlling the new online technologies which were emerging at the outset of a new political era. One of the

¹⁰⁵ Since 1992, senior Party leaders have served ten-year terms in office. These span two five-year periods, each marked by a single National Party Congress (*zhongguo gongchandang quanguo daibiao dahui*) at which leadership decisions are announced.

¹⁰⁶ Facebook and Twitter, taken to be archetypes of Web 2.0 functionality, were both launched by 2007 and were, in the 2007-8 period, accessible from China (based on the author’s own personal use from China in 2007), along with Chinese copycat alternatives such as Fanfou. The launch of Sina Weibo in 2009, and its rapid popularisation in 2010 and 2011, may be seen as an important temporal threshold.

¹⁰⁷ This has been discussed in more detail on page 44.

three protest events took place *before* this conceptual threshold, and two *after* it. Therefore the research is mindful of the possibility that mainstream media performance may have changed on this basis. Nevertheless, as has been argued throughout this thesis, it is assumed politics takes precedence over technological development and the author rejects a 'techno-utopian' (Morozov, 2011) view of technology which may mark the arrival of any specific technology as *revolutionising* any given area of social, political or economic interaction. All three protests under examination took place during an era when the Party had manifestly surrendered its absolute monopoly on communicative control and was seeking to come to terms with a degree of unfettered public debate. This is the context against which these events should be considered and explains why this is very much a cross-sectional study. A more comprehensive longitudinal study of protest in the Chinese media would be of great interest to the author but is too great a challenge for this specific project and must be consigned to future research.

Chapter 6: The Xiamen PX Protest

Background

The Xiamen PX protest has deeply political roots. The island city has long been at the vanguard of the ongoing dispute between Beijing and Taipei. It was from Xiamen¹⁰⁸ that Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces fled the mainland in 1949 and Jinmen, an island a few miles from downtown Xiamen, remains under Taiwanese control to this day.

In the late 1980s, political tensions eased and the PRC was keen to attract investment from the now-wealthy island across the straits. In 1989, Premier Li Peng authorised the establishment of a 100sq-km 'Taiwanese Investment Zone' on farmland in the Haicang district (Ansfield, 2012). A section of the investment zone was designated for petrochemical development and Taiwan's Formosa Plastics forged a deal to develop a large PX plant there, only for the deal to collapse amid national-level politicking (ibid). Xianglu, another Taiwanese-owned company with petrochemical interests, began operating in Xiamen in the early 1990s and, in 2001, it proposed adding a PX plant to its other petrochemical interests (Xiamen Evening News, 2007a). In May 2001 a proposal was sent from Xiamen to national regulatory authorities and a consultancy was commissioned to assess the project thereafter. In September of the following year, the consultancy reported back to the Beijing authorities. In a proposal issued in November 2002, the Xiamen PX plan was included within a nationally-planned PX network. The proposed Xiamen plant was, however, the only one which would be invested in by a non-mainland company.

In 2002 and 2003, the head of Xianglu, Chen Yu-hao, became embroiled in a corruption scandal in Taiwan and fell out with the independence-minded president of Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian. Chen Yu-hao essentially became a fugitive in his homeland but pursued mainland investments with renewed vigour, leading to speculation that the project's approval – initially by the State Council in Beijing in February 2004, next by the State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA)¹⁰⁹ in July 2005 and, finally and

¹⁰⁸ Then known as 'Amoy' in Anglophone circles.

¹⁰⁹ SEPA became known as the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) in 2008.

decisively, by the National Development and Reform Commission (*guojia fazhan he gaige weiyuanhui*), or NDRC, in July 2006 – had as least as much to do with cross-Straits politics as it did with the specifics of the PX plant (Ansfield, 2013).

During the years of stalled industrial development, Haicang became a focus for residential development. Apartments were built in large numbers – some of them luxury seaside condos – as well as schools and a new campus for Beijing Normal University. “Industrialisation and urbanisation were headed on a collision course” (Ansfield 2013: 151) as both government and developers sensed that real-estate was as potentially conducive to wealth-creation as industrial projects.

In the spring of 2006 there was some controversy online as many of those who had purchased apartments in Haicang complained about smells from a nearby water treatment plant (Ansfield, 2013). This intensified after the official approval of the PX plant in July 2006. In August 2006, the Haicang Land Development Corporation began land requisitioning for the project and within just 80 days all the land requisitioned for the plant had been successfully cleared (Zhu, 2007).

Protest Narrative

Despite the proposal’s passage through various government bodies and the preparatory work conducted on-site, the project did not command media focus until early March 2007 during the so-called ‘two meetings’ (*liang hui*), that of the National People’s Congress (NPC) (*Quanguo Renmin Daibiao Dahui*, or *Ren Da*) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) (*Zhongguo Renmin Zhengzhi Xieshang Huiyi*, or *Renmin Zhixie*), the PRC’s two governmental deliberative bodies which form every Spring. During the latter, a proposal to relocate the proposed PX plant, made by six academics from the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) (*Zhongguo Kexue Yuan*) – a scientific think-tank linked to the State Council – attracted 105 signatures from fellow members of the CPPCC. The proposal was adopted as a key recommendation at the end of the session. The move attracted limited domestic media coverage (Zheng, 2007; China Business News, 2007).

One of the CPPCC members was Zhao Yufen, a Xiamen University academic who had been in secret discussion with the Haicang authorities to build a biochemical plant on

land that was now earmarked for use by Xianglu's PX plant (Ansfield, 2013). She and colleagues from Xiamen University had argued for the PX project to be relocated on scientific grounds in the autumn of 2006 and again in meetings with Xiamen city leaders in January 2007 (Qian & Bandurski, 2011). Having made no progress, Zhao took the case to the *liang hui* in Beijing. Her proposal included suggestions that paroxylene was a dangerous chemical which would heighten the rates of cancer and birth defects. It pointed to lack of adequate buffer zones between the plant and residential areas. PX was even linked with a highly publicized chemical spill two years earlier in northern China's Songhua River.

Online activity escalated in March when Xiamen-based freelance journalist Zhong Xiaoyong, writing under his pen-name Lian Yue, republished the story and repeated many of the claims made in the CPPCC proposal in his blog (Lian, 2007). Postings on the subject increased in several online forums such as Xiamen's 'Little Fish' (*Xiao Yu*) forum and the student pages of Xiamen University. Anti-PX graffiti appeared in Xiamen, which, itself, became the subject of online discussion. Online agitation continued throughout the spring.

On May 30th, with talk of a protest intensifying, the local government announced the suspension of the project, though left open the possibility of future resumption. Though the precise flow of political diktat remains unclear, it is unlikely that the decision to cancel was taken unilaterally at a municipal level. "Xiamen leaders, state media contacts confirmed [to Ansfield], had succumbed to pressure from the central authorities, who were plugged into the protest buzz via *neican*, or internal reports, from Xinhua news agency journalists on the ground" (Ansfield, 2013: 167-168).

Protest marches nonetheless took place on June 1st and June 2nd, 2007. They began early on June 1st with a gathering of several hundred protestors outside the municipal government offices in central Xiamen. Protesters appeared to be largely urbanites concerned with deleterious health effects and the possible impact on the value of their properties, though this group included at least *some* people who, while from Xiamen City, were residing in rural and undeveloped locations on Haicang (Ansfield, 2013). An initial plan to march across the bridge connecting Xiamen Island with Haicang was thwarted by a police block, but protestors curled back and marched

around the streets of central Xiamen and in the direction of Xiamen University, where the gates had been locked to prevent protestors entering the campus. Many carried banners calling for Xiamen to be protected from the chemical threat and for the people's voices to be heard. Similar protests continued on June 2, documented by bloggers whose pictures and videos of large crowds reached a global audience via the web and their appropriation by mainstream media outlets. The protests ended on the evening of June 2 (Ansfield, 2013).

In June there appeared some sporadic media reports though, outside of Xiamen itself, these referenced the protests only obliquely. In July there was limited media discussion of an initiative to require Xiamen Netizens to use their real names when registering for blog IDs. These also made oblique references to the protests. The story was resurrected on December 6th, 2007 when a revised Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was released which claimed the project was safe but indicated that the public would have the ultimate say. Two 'public' seminars took place in Xiamen on December 13th and December 14th which received widespread media attention. Rumours of a decision to relocate the plant to the southern reaches of Fujian province were reported in a Hong Kong newspaper on December 18th amid a final wave of reporting on the issue on the mainland. Mainland sources were careful to point out that no firm decision had yet been made. Official confirmation of the move only came in 2008.

A smaller scale protest *in support of* the PX plant was made in January 2008 by workers worried about losing their jobs, though this received no mainland media coverage (Ansfield, 2008). The NDRC ratified the decision to relocate the plant in 2008 though further protests were reported by Taiwanese media in Dongshan, a tourist island close to the Gulei Peninsula, the final location for the PX plant (Beck, 2008). The relocated plant finally began operations in 2013.

In a final – and somewhat ironic – twist, an explosion at the plant occurred in July 2013 on the same day the *People's Daily* published an editorial in praise of the petrochemical industry's safety record in mainland China (Li, 2013b).

The Protest in Historic Context

The Xiamen PX protests of 2007 have been claimed as seminal in several aspects: firstly, they provided the first clear evidence that widespread public awareness of environmental costs of development had taken root in the developed and relatively affluent eastern seaboard cities of mainland China. For the first time in the post-89 era, an educated middle-class was protesting on grounds beyond simple bread-and-butter issues (Tong & Lei, 2010); secondly, the protests demonstrated how new online platforms and forums could be used to exchange information, organize opposition and foster civic engagement with China's opaque political process (Hung, 2013); thirdly, the Xiamen PX protest was the first to employ the 'collective stroll' (*jiti sanbu*), a non-violent, non-confrontational protest methodology (Trevaskes, 2012). Such 'strolls' have occurred on several notable occasions since 2007, most notably in Shanghai in January 2008 when hundreds of residents successfully 'strolled' in opposition to a proposed extension of the cities' high-speed Maglev train¹¹⁰, and in 2011 in Beijing when online calls were made, and apparently unheeded, for a 'stroll' in Beijing's Wangfujing shopping district in support of so-called 'Jasmine Revolutions' taking place in north Africa.

The Xiamen protests were not revolutionary, however, and should be seen in historic context. Environmental awareness has been building in China since the mid-1990s with the appearance of the first 'green' NGOs¹¹¹ whose numbers, by 2008, had swelled to 3,539¹¹² (Boyd, 2013: 44). There had also been a handful of prominent campaigns involving some levels of activism and protest which involved journalist actors, notably the anti Nu River dam in 2004. Certainly low-level protests against polluting factories or contaminated waterways had been taking place routinely during the first decade of the 21st century. And in terms of Information Communication Technology (ICT) impact, 2005's spate of urban anti-Japanese protests had previously been organised by SMS.

¹¹⁰ The plan was later struck down and no extension to the Maglev has since taken place.

¹¹¹ A NGO is a non-governmental organisation. The term usually applies to not-for-profit groups which are not part of any given government structure. Such groups, however, may still be funded by government.

¹¹² All-China Federation figures, which include Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau. Of these, more than a third are actually 'government organised non-governmental organisations', or GONGOs.

In the years since 2007, anti-PX protests and marches have taken place in a number of major Chinese cities. A protest was reported in Nanjing in the week the relocation of Xiamen's PX plant was announced (Xiao, 2008), while major protests have since taken place in a number of large Chinese cities, including Dalian (2011), Shifang (2012), Ningbo (2012), Chengdu (2013), Kunming (2013) and Maoming (2014). Indeed, PX protest has become so canonical within political ranks that by 2014, the China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong, a Shanghai-based Communist Party school for officials, was featuring a mock PX-related press conference as part of its training regime (Economist, 2014b). Anti-PX protest itself has come to be regarded as a pillar within the broader fold of environmental campaigning and awareness (Geall, 2013), which includes increased attention on matters such as air quality (specifically PM2.5), water pollution and movements against major infrastructure projects such as the damming of Tiger Leaping Gorge or the gorges of the central Yangtze.

Narrative of Domestic Reporting

Phases of reporting

The national Chinese press reported the controversy around the Xiamen PX plant and protest in five phases. The first occurred in March 2007 when the issue was raised during the *liang hui* in Beijing. The second ran from late May until the suspension of the project on May 30th and largely focused on the brewing controversy. The third, short, phase, ran from May 31st to June 1st and focused on the cancellation of the project. The fourth, similarly short, phase is during the actual street protests, June 2nd and 3rd ¹¹³. The fifth phase comes in the immediate aftermath of the protest between June 4th and the middle of June. There were additional reports in November and December of 2007 when the PX project's future was finalised.

Phase 1: March 2007 (NPCCC meeting highlights case)

The first newspaper to report the PX controversy in Xiamen was the Guangzhou-based *Southern Metropolis Daily* which ran an interview with Zhao Yufen on March 11th, prior to Zhao submitting her proposal to the CPPCC (Fang & Zhu, 2007). The article appears to carry a general criticism of the pace of construction across China

¹¹³ Protests took place on June 1st and 2nd, though, as a morning newspaper, all reports printed on June 2nd and June 3rd would have, necessarily, been written on the previous day.

and the Haicang PX plant proposal is specifically referenced in the middle of the article. The *China Youth Daily* (*zhongguo qingnianbao*), a Beijing-based national daily and organ of the Communist Youth League (CYL)¹¹⁴, reported Zhao's petition on March 15th (Zheng, 2007). On March 19th, the Beijing-based *China Business News* (*zhongguo jingyingbao*), a business-focused weekly run under the auspices of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), ran a longer story (China Business News, 2007). Both news reports focus on the CPPCC proposal, jointly signed by 105 members, condemning the proposed plant and highlighting its dangers, though they each carry supplementary interviews with Zhao Yufen.

Phase 2: Late May 2007 (Online controversy builds, protest is threatened)

In late-May, two publications carried interviews with Zhao Yufen. The Shanghai financial daily, the *China Business News* (*diyi caijing ribao*), and the Xinhua-associated *Oriental Outlook Weekly* (*liaowang dongfang zhoukan*) both reported concerns by Zhao that the Xiamen authorities had accelerated development of the PX plant and had refused to re-examine environmental concerns (Huang, 2007a). One of the *China Business News* (three) supervising institutions is the CYL.

The *Phoenix Weekly* news magazine, affiliated with Hong Kong's *Phoenix TV* channel, published a report on the brewing controversy in its mainland edition over the weekend of May 26th – 27th ¹¹⁵ (Liu, 2007). This was covered in *Phoenix's* own *You Bao Tian Tian Du* news digest programme on May 28th, 2007 and was reprinted by blogger Lian Yue. However, the original magazine was physically removed from newsstands in Xiamen (China Economic Times, 2007).

It was the *Xiamen Evening News* (*xiamen wanbao*), the commercial offshoot on the Xiamen Party organ, the *Xiamen Daily* (*xiamen ribao*)¹¹⁶, that first published PX-related reports, printing first – on May 28th – a long interview with Xiamen's environmental protection bureau director (Xiamen Evening News, 2007a), who defended the project, and, a day later, a similarly long report focused on the Dragon

¹¹⁴ The CYL is a mass membership Party organisation directly subservient to the CCP Central Committee.

¹¹⁵ The magazine, issue no. 256, is technically dated May 29th, 2007 but, like many news weeklies, was distributed ahead of its stated publication date.

¹¹⁶ As of early 2014, the *Xiamen Daily* is known as the *Haixi Chenbao*.

Aromatics (Tenglong) company, explaining the project's planning process and overall safety (Xiamen Evening News, 2007b).

These reports caught the attention of the southern media. Hong Kong media outlets covered the story in both print and on TV, while, on May 29th, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* (*nanfang dushi bao*) wrote a lengthy report summarising events and reporting on the viral spread of an SMS text message, calling for a protest, as well as efforts to spread dissent on its own online forum, Baoliao (Lan & Zhang, 2007).

Locally, the *Xiamen Daily*, the organ of the Xiamen Municipal CCP Committee, first mentioned the issue in a front page report on May 30th (Xiamen Daily, 2007a). The decision to suspend the project was announced on the very morning the newspaper hit the newsstands.

Phase 3: May 31st, June 1st 2007 (Project suspension announced)

On May 31st the *Southern Weekend* carried a long summary of events, beginning with the news that the project had been suddenly suspended the previous day (Zhu, 2007). On May 31st and June 1st the *Xiamen Daily* carried a series of reports justifying the decision to suspend the development (Huang, 2007; Xiamen Daily, 2007b).

Phase 4: June 2nd – 3rd 2007 (Street protests)

News reports *during* the protests were led by the *Xiamen Daily* and represented a mixture of news stories and comment pieces. The news stories predominantly concerned official speeches and comments made at various governmental meetings specifically convened to deal with the crisis. Reports of these speeches were also carried on local TV (Liu, 2013). No other mainland newspaper directly reported the protest, though the *Southern Metropolis Daily* did print a story *about* the Xiamen government's public warnings against so-called 'rumour mongering' on June 2nd (Southern Metropolis Daily, 2007a).

Phase 5: June 4th – 26th 2007 (The protest aftermath)

The *Xiamen Daily* was highly active in its reporting in the four days immediately after the cessation of street protests though few other publications drew attention to the issue. The Beijing-based business magazine *Caijing* published a lengthy report on June 4th which discussed the issue of how the EIA review would be conducted but made no

mention *at all* of the protests (Zhuang, 2007). The *China Economic Times* (*zhongguo jingji shibao*), affiliated with the State Council's Development Research Centre (*guowuyuan fazhan yanjiu zhongxin*), published a similar article on June 5th, delving into the planning and financing of the project and featuring a handful of critical voices from the Xiamen citizenry (China Economic Times, 2007).

The *Southern Weekend* published nothing about the protest in the June 7th edition, the first following the protest, though it carried a comment piece, ostensibly about a concurrent piece of news concerned with pollution from the city of Wuxi, which reflected on the importance of popular happiness when pursuing an economic development which has serious environmental implications (Xiao, 2007). A similar comment piece was made in Shanghai's *Oriental Morning Post* (*dongfang zaobao*) on June 5th which specifically cited the PX project, albeit briefly (Tong, 2007).

A mission from the NDRC in Beijing visited Xiamen on June 7th (Tatlow, 2007) and the decision for SEPA to take control of the EIA review was made across all major news channels on June 8th. The *Oriental Morning Post* reworked a Xinhua story on the PX project which explained it would be reassessed on environmental protection grounds at a national level (Yan, 2007). The *Southern Metropolis Daily* also reported the story, with the bulk of its copy coming from a press conference exchange between journalists and the director of environmental protection in the Haicang district of Xiamen (Zhang, 2007). The *Xiamen Daily*, for the first time, took the majority of its editorial copy from Xinhua.

China Newsweek, a magazine published by Xinhua, carried a lengthy, reflective cover story on the PX crisis in Xiamen on June 11th (Xie, 2007).

On June 27th, *Caijing* published another report, again focused on, and arguing for, 'procedural fairness' in the review process, but this time making explicit mention of the protest that had occurred (Long et al, 2007).

A further round of reports on the issue appeared in December, led by the *People's Daily* on December 19th, announcing the Xiamen government's application to relocate the PX plant within the planning framework (Zhu & Jiang, 2007). In an article published online late on the same day, *Southern Weekend* suggested a "victory of

public opinion” (*minyi de shengyi*) and saw “enlightened government performance” (*zhengfu de kaiming biao*) (Zhu & Su, 2007). On December 28th the *Southern Metropolis Daily* published a special ‘thanking’ Netizens for their contributions to Chinese public life in 2007, making particular mention on their contribution in the anti-PX campaign in Xiamen (Southern Metropolis Daily, 2007b).

Propaganda Strategies

The following section outlines the propaganda strategy of both local and central government at various junctures in the 2007 protest movement, as discerned through an analysis of news texts.

Xiamen Reporting

Though there is some variety in reporting, it is helpful to delineate the core propaganda planks which undergird the local media’s reporting of first active phase of the crisis¹¹⁷. These set of core messages may be subdivided into two fields, the first addressing the nature of the project itself, and the second addressing public opinion towards the project.

Explaining the project

In terms of explaining the project, the following messages are consistently repeated during the pre-protest phase:

- The project has gone through a lengthy and rigorous planning process
- This process was approved at *national* level
- The local government has reviewed plans in light of concerns raised in March
- Paroxylene has been deemed by central government to be a chemical of “acute national shortage” (*PX shu woguo jinqu chanpin*)

Explaining the controversy

In responding to the brewing controversy, Xiamen media demonstrates the following strategies:

¹¹⁷ Between May 26th and May 30th, defined according to the above categorisation as the second stage of national reporting on the situation in Xiamen.

- Identifies the existence of unspecified “views and opinions” (*yixie kanfa he yijian*)
- Points to the source of these opinions as “some scholars and citizens” (*youxie xuezhe, shimin*)
- Obliquely points to the online expression of these opinions by stating that they have been expressed by “employing different methods” (*yi butong fangshi*)
- Acknowledges the views are based on an “interest in and care for” Haicang’s environment (*chuyu... guanzhu, guanxin*)...
- ...but declares that such views derive from “insufficient awareness” of environmental protection (*bugou liaojie*)

It is evident that in Xiamen there is distinct turn-taking among the two local newspapers. The *Xiamen Evening News* was initially charged with articulating the government case in the first attempt to respond to online communications. However, just prior to the suspension of the project, the newspaper fell silent and responsibility evidently passed to the *Xiamen Daily*, the party organ and politically senior ‘mother’ publication, which did not report or reprint the *Evening News*’ interviews.

Once reporting was passed to the *Xiamen Daily*, the crisis is reported primarily through the prism of government meetings in which the authorial voice is deliberately confused. That is to say, it is rarely made clear whether the printed words represent the reporting of the journalist or the words of government leaders.

The first article was a short front page piece on May 30th which reported a special meeting of leaders, ostensibly convened to discuss the project and in which the first hints of a possible suspension are made (the actual suspension was formally announced at 9am on May 31st). The article’s headline reads: “Municipal leaders go to Haicang to convene a special meeting” (Xiamen Daily, 2007a).

The content mixes defiance with apparent concession. The text itself foregrounds Xiamen Party Secretary, He Lifeng, and comprises a summary of his speech to the meeting. The article opens with a defence of the legitimacy of the PX project and claims that dissenting views (‘different views and opinions’) have been caused by an

‘insufficient awareness’ (*buzu liaojie*) of the process rather than any inherent problem. However, the dominant tone is one of concession. ‘Understanding’ (*lijie*) is expressed toward the ‘contradictions and problems’ (*maodun he wenti*); opposing views are declared to be good-natured and then; and, finally, the project is said to be in the process of being reassessed at the national level, prompted by unspecified changes to the ‘planning and construction situation’ (*guihua jianshe qingkuang*) at the beginning of the year. The result is that, according to the article, it’s possible to ‘wait a while, take a step back and slow things down’ (*deng yi deng, kan yi kan, huan yi huan*).

A key passage makes clear the balance being struck being conciliatory recognition of the pure motives of commentators and the need to assert their position as being basically ‘incorrect’:

Recently, based on their interest in and care for Haicang’s environment, but because of their insufficient knowledge of the environmental impact assessment, several scholars and citizens have used different methods to express their views and opinions. This makes abundantly clear that their environmental consciousness has increased and reflects their love, care and protectiveness towards Xiamen. (Xiamen Daily, 2007a)

Explaining the suspension

During the second active phase of the crisis¹¹⁸, a new set of messages is introduced by local Xiamen media. These are reconciled with the two categories of messages – concerning *the project* on the one hand, and the nature of *public opinion* on the other – that had been established over the previous few days.

In explaining the reasons for, and benefits of suspension of the protest, the local media now makes the following arguments:

- The PX project is being suspended to ‘carry out a broader environmental impact assessment’ (*zai geng da fanwei jinxing huanping lunzheng*)

¹¹⁸ Between May 31th and June 1st, defined according to the above categorisation as the third stage of national reporting on the situation in Xiamen.

- The government ‘respects science and public opinion’ (*zunzhong kexue, zunzhong renyi*)

On May 31st, the *Xiamen Daily* carried the announcement of the suspension of the project. The isolated front-page headline (pointing to a longer story on page two) reads: ‘In order to discuss environmental impact within a larger context, the city has decided to suspend construction of the PX project’.

At the top of page two of the May 31st newspaper are two near-identical stories, placed one below the other. The only difference between the two is the way the stories are introduced. The first is ostensibly a report of the outcome of an executive meeting, which features a list of the participants, as well as their official titles. The second is introduced as being a report of a news conference. Beyond the first paragraph, the two stories carry almost identical content, and attempt to both justify the original legitimacy of the project at the same time as explaining the reasons for postponement (the need to ‘enlarge the scope’ of the original EIA). Unlike the front page comment, however, both stories end with explicit references to looming protests. “We must actively maintain social peace and stability to protect the positive trend of exponential growth recently promoted by the city” (Huang, 2007b).

Several norms are established on this day, which are repeated in the days ahead. The first is the establishment of a locus of PX reporting on page two of the newspaper. Between June 2nd and June 7th, page two of the *Xiamen Daily* carries multiple reports on the unfolding situation, dedicating the entire page to the task, and providing a physical locus for referencing the ‘official’ line¹¹⁹. Secondly, from this day forward, all news reports are stripped of a named author. In conjunction with the linguistic strategies described in the next section, this has the effect of obscuring the authorial voice and expanding the potential boundaries of the official, authorised, correct ‘we’; finally, an editorial voice is introduced for the first time, one which is deployed daily until June 7th. Editorials by Xia Zhongping – likely a pen-name – are numbered from the very first day, suggesting a strategic deployment. The first comment piece is printed on the front page within an eye-catching red box (Xia, 2007a), though later

¹¹⁹ The one exception is June 1st, where page two is given up to a Children’s Day report. June 1 is dedicated as ‘Children’s Day’ in China and school children are given a day off school and eulogised in civic events and activities.

editorials are on inside pages. That the commentator's voice is indistinguishable from the general newspaper's voice is demonstrated by the fact that it is *this* editorial which introduces the new plank of propaganda, that the government 'respects science and public opinion' as equal partners.

Reports in the *Xiamen Daily* of June 1st mark a slight change in tone. For the first time, there is the semblance of reportage. Under a headline reading, "Suspension of Haicang PX Project Receives Support of Masses", the *Xiamen Daily* journalist – unnamed – reports personally seeing work halt at the PX construction site. It also uses a direct quote from a manager from Dragon Aromatics. The story also features a purported interview with an untitled individual, named as Shen Yao, who admits to there having 'previously' been 'worries' (*danyou*) due to insufficient knowledge of the project, though this is immediately followed by Shen ostensibly claiming the suspension of the project "reflects the municipal government's people-centredness, their respect for the people's feelings and the people's will, and their responsibility toward the people, which is worthy of our trust". The story concludes with a series of paraphrases from CCP neighbourhood committee members, reporting that the people fully supported and praised the government's care for the people's will (Xiamen Daily, 2007b).

Targeting the protestors

The third active phase of the crisis¹²⁰, coinciding with the advent of street protest, necessitates the introduction of another series of propaganda messages. Xiamen media makes the following claims in relation to street protestors:

- Public gatherings have taken place 'without authorisation' (*weijing pizhun*), and 'assemblies' (*juhui*) and 'marches' (*youxing*) are 'illegal' (*feifa*)
- Protests have 'affected the normal economic and social order of the city, caused public transport travel inconvenience, and damaged Xiamen's good image' (*yingxiang le woshi zhengchang de shengchan shenghuo zhuxu, gei shimin jiaotong chuxing dailai le bubian, ye*

¹²⁰ Between June 2nd and June 3rd, defined according to the above categorisation as the fourth stage of national reporting on the situation in Xiamen.

yingxiang le xiamen de lianghao xingxiang) – with particular emphasis made on the damage to its title as the ‘First Civilized City of China’

- Among the protestors lurk sinister forces. An ‘extreme minority’ (*shaoshu ren*) have ‘deliberately taken advantage of [the event] to cause trouble’ (*youyi jieci zhizao shiduan*)
- Protestors were at risk of being harmed by the climate. Hot weather was likely to affect the people’s ‘physical and psychological health’ (*shenxin jiankang*)
- Protestors were at risk of being ‘used’ (*liyong*) by ‘people with ulterior motives’ (*bie you yongxin de ren*) and ‘criminal elements’ (*weifa fenzi*).
- Protest had damaged the odds of success for teenage students about to sit their *gaokao* university entrance exams.
- In an expansion of an earlier propaganda plank, the government is now said to ‘respect science, respect public opinion and respect environmental protection’

guangda shimin ying tongguo zhenchang qudao fanying yijian he jianyi) (Xiamen Daily, 2007c). The body of the text is divided into four distinct sections, each of which begins in identical fashion (“Last night, the [organisational body or association] convened a meeting...”), differing only in terms of *which* organisation had mobilised (the Municipal People's Congress (a neighbourhood-based administrative structure); the municipal CPPCC; the Communist Youth League, and the Women's Union. A fifth story, headlined “Citizens' opinions reported through normal channels are welcomed” (*huanying shimin tongguo zhengchang qudao fanying yijian*), contains a brief description of the protest but urges participants to “remain sober minded” (*baochi qingxing tounao*) and to use “normal channels” (*zhengchang qudao*) to make their feelings known (Xiamen Daily, 2007d).

All four initial reports begin with named representatives of the various governmental and administrative bodies and purport to quote their ideas without *actually* giving explicit quotes, in precisely the same manner that He Lifeng was introduced in the first report on May 30th (it is notable that He Lifeng is entirely absent from reports on June 2nd). However, in contrast to the formal reports of the proceedings of administrative or Party units, there is a separate story, printed beneath the cluster of stories and carrying its own headline (“Municipal Government Holds Press Conference”) which makes explicit the fact that the government is also communicating with the media – as opposed to pursuing intra-Party communications. At this press conference, the deputy mayor, Pei Jinjia, is reported as having used language which slightly resists the most obvious elements of the propaganda planks described above. He is quoted as describing the behaviour of protestors as ‘somewhat excitable’ (*bijiao jidong*) while pointing to the ‘extremely few individuals’ (*you ji gebie ren*) – as opposed to an ‘extreme minority’ who had ‘deliberately hijacked the event to cause trouble’ (*youyi jieci zhizao shiduan*).

The main report from the second day of the protest – written on June 2nd and printed on June 3rd – is similar in nature. It carries an almost identical headline to the previous day – demonstrating a consistency in the propaganda strategy – and is broken down into three distinct sections, with each – again – ostensibly representing a report from an official meeting. However, the three cited bodies are different and more junior

entities: democratic parties, federations of industry, people's organizations, trade unions and representatives from Siming District, the focus of the protest action. June 3rd sees the first time that the phrase 'people with ulterior motives' (*bie you yongxin de ren*) is used (Xiamen Daily, 2007e).

Beside the main report, the second page lead report puts the various propaganda messages, above, into the mouths of ordinary citizens. Headlined "Give students back a peaceful environment", the article features apparent quotes from five citizens critical of the marches. 'Mr Wu' is reported as saying: "These people have wrecked my child's precious revision time. They are hurting the people and damaging our lives". The report goes on to quote a hotel clerk, a taxi driver, an elderly resident and an unnamed 'shop keeper' who is reported as saying, "Before you act, you need to think about whether you are being exploited by people with ulterior motives" (Xiamen Daily, 2007f). There can be no way of knowing if a member of the public genuinely uttered those words. What is interesting is the editorial decision to put words which are in absolute accordance with local government *tifa* into the mouths of citizens.

Beside these attempts to spread anti-protest messages as widely as possible among representatives of Xiamen society, local media on June 3rd carries two straightforward reprints of statements made by academic Zhao Yufen and the Xiamen Public Security Bureau (Xiamen Daily, 2007g). These are not 'reports of statements' – the reporting vehicle used almost exclusively up to this point – but rather messages purported to be authentic by the apparent absence of mediation. They are printed in *both* the party newspaper, the *Xiamen Daily*, and its commercial offshoot, the *Xiamen Evening News*.

Zhao Yufen's signed statement disclaims comments attributed to her by 'the media' and agrees support for "the municipal government's respect for science, respect for public opinion and respect for environmental protection".

Beside this is a statement by the Xiamen PSB which, in addition to referring generically to "illegal assemblies and marches" (*feifa juhui, youxing*), introduces two specific accusations of internet fabrications and threatening behaviour (discussed below). The statement goes on:

From the perspective of these events and in the view of information ascertained by security organs', the character of the current situation is changing, and there are signs that the illegal assemblies and marches are being manipulated and exploited by criminal elements. The masses should be on high alert. The city's security bureau hereby calls on the masses to treasure the benefits of peace and stability, to help the security bureau carry out its professional duty, to remain on a state of high vigilance, to clearly separate right from wrong, and to avoid being exploited by criminal elements. (Xiamen Daily, 2007h)

The implied threat hinges on the term 'high alert' (*gaodu jingjue*). Not only should readers be alert to the presumably dangerous 'criminal elements' themselves, but they also need to be alert to the danger of being accused of *belonging* to that particular category, particularly given the fact that the assemblies have themselves been declared 'illegal'.

Reframing the protest

June 4th marks the beginning of a new stage of the reporting of the protest. With the street protests now clearly over, the emphasis is on articulating resolution. The following messages are clear in local reports:

- Economic development requires stability
- Unapproved and illegal demonstrations, as well as 'radical rhetoric', have brought confusion, disorder and shame by affecting Xiamen's hitherto unimpeachable national image
- Publicity efforts must be stepped up so as to avoid future public misunderstandings
- Real estate development is inseparable from social stability

There is an obvious appropriation of national development discourse in terms of the need for strong economic development. There is also a renewed emphasis on the high quality of Xiamen's existing environment. There are a series of articles specifically concerning the real estate industry in Xiamen which make clear that the industry will only 'develop' (subtext: prices will remain high) if there is a stable social

environment. Above all else, there is very clear emphasis on the adverse effect on Xiamen's prestige and reputation caused by the protests.

A full page of coverage in the *Xiamen Daily* on June 4th features a mixture of explanation, invitation and threat, though one which specifically addresses all of the primary complaints heard in the protests – procedural fairness, safety, environmental pollution, real estate prices – and, for the first time, hears from online commentators.

The page-lead article appears to establish the range of permissible opinion. The report is based around the comments by municipal government Secretary General, Xu Mingyao, during a press conference the previous day. Gratitude is expressed towards the 1,557 residents who had already made their feelings known to the government through 'normal channels'. These were declared to be of three kinds: those who admitted they knew little about the project and hoped the government would base their decision on the EIA; those who supported the project on the basis it was an enviable investment and good for jobs; and those who worried the project would cause environmental pollution. More feedback was solicited 'through relevant channels'. The only reference to the protest is Xu's comment that "we hope the masses will collectively safeguard Xiamen's security and social stability" (Xiamen Daily, 2007i).

Contained within a large central red box are three stories and a simple cartoon which explains how all of Xiamen's 'major' projects undergo 'rigorous' and 'scientific' planning and testing. One of the three stories contains an interview with a Xiamen resident – "a man who deeply loves the warm and beautiful city of Xiamen" – who had previously worked at a PX plant in the northwest region of Xinjiang. He explains that "From examining that plant's recent history, not one fire or explosive accident has occurred to cause human injury" (Xiamen Daily, 2007j). It's a peculiar interjection on the debate, given the conditional manner of the reassurance. It is stated only that nobody was injured in the listed accidents – not that they had not occurred – and that only that the 'records' show that no such accidents had occurred – as opposed to declaring no accidents having *actually* occurred.

The three stories at the base of the page all purport to feature comments from real voices. On the left of the page is a story in which many real estate sources suggested

the ‘development’ of the industry would be damaged by social instability; an adjacent story features online voices which – again – used phrases in absolute concert with the official language of government officials to express their opinion. These included one user who claimed to have been on the marches but who realised that “individuals only thinking about their own gains (*yi ji zhi li*) stirred and organised those ignorant of the facts (*bu zhiqing ren*), and used online media to promote the marches”. Another features excerpts from a long story from a Netizen who was inadvertently caught up in the march because her taxi was blocked. She reports that the numbers were much smaller than the rumoured figure and reports overhearing a comment which proved that protestors were being organised and paid by real estate workers. The final story features reportage with the journalist asking six Haicang villagers their views. Aside from an admission from the fourth interview that “villagers had some concerns [about the plans] because they had insufficient understanding of the PX project” (*you yu dui PX xiangmu quefa liaojie, cunmin duici you yixie danyou*), all comments express explicit support for the government and condemnation of anything which upsets stability.

The two stories printed in the sidebar are the most vociferous in attacking protestors. The uppermost is a statement from the PSB, released the previous day and printed in full, which asserts that offenders would be ‘punished according to the law’ (*yifa yingyu chufa*). The cited offenders are given as the “extreme minority” (*jishao shu ren*) who had continued marching on June 2; who deliberately confused the situation (*youyi hunxiao shiting*); or who had instigated and organised the marches and even “refused to follow orders”. A three day amnesty period is given in which those who “take the initiative in briefing [the PSB] on the issues would be treated leniently according to the law”, while those who refuse to come forward within three days, brief on the issues and accept punishment would be investigated and punished severely, according to the law” (Xiamen Daily, 2007k).

The second story is the fifth¹²¹ instalment of Xia Zhongping’s commentary. It is filled with literary flourishes, metaphorical allusions and pervasive ambiguity. There are two related themes. Firstly, malevolent forces flourish in the dark and must be

¹²¹ Xia Zhongping’s editorials are actually numbered within the title of article.

flushed out (“Evil spirits are most afraid of the light. In the glare of the sun, they are shown for what they really are”). Secondly, “certain media” (*gebie meiti*) has allowed these “evil spirits” (*mogui chimei*) to flourish.

There is considerable ambiguity as to exactly *which* media is referred to. The final line of the penultimate paragraph suggests it may be primarily regarded as being online and foreign sources: “We...advise the masses to believe the government, and to believe mainstream media and not to be led by the nose by alien¹²² and non-mainstream media” (*women...fenquan guangda shimin xiangxin zhengfu, xiangxin zhuliu meiti, buyao bei yixie wailai de, feizhuliu de meiti qianzhe bizi zou*) which have “all been manipulated by invisible and impure hands” (Xia, 2007c).

The final paragraph is florid:

Lin Yutang¹²³ once said that China is a country without memory. Though strongly put, this notion is not without substance. Haven't we come across enough people with ulterior motives who have used 'psychological tactics' to confuse, deceive and harm us? Yet once the scar has formed on the wound, we always forget the pain it caused. The storm may have passed but the lesson has been a profound one. Decent folk must remain clear and alert. (ibid)

June 5th marks change of tack in the local propaganda battle. The page lead picture story is on another major infrastructure project in Haicang which had gone through “scientific policy making” (*kexue juece*). The page lead story is a by-lined story by mayor Liu Cigui which extolls Xiamen’s adherence to the principles of environmental development, making prominent use of comments by Premier Wen Jiabao. The editorial, referring to the controversy as the “PX project which citizens recently paid a lot of attention to” (*zuijin shimin guanzhu de PX xiangmu*), makes repeated reference to the notion, espoused as one of the key philosophical planks of the Hu-Wen era, of “harmonious and scientific development” (Xia, 2007d).

¹²² The word ‘alien’ (*wailai de*) is highly ambiguous and may refer to something that is ‘foreign’, ‘exotic’, or merely ‘from outside the city’.

¹²³ An illustrious Chinese writer and translator of the early 20th century who left China in 1935 and lived out his years in the US.

Three below-the-fold stories feature direct reference to the protest. Two of the three feature unquoted interviews with a succession of business leaders – many of whom maintain political titles too – explaining the virtues of stability in terms of promoting Xiamen’s development. A third story features four interviews with members of the public who, again, speak only in official language. One is said to have “used the ‘four believes’ to express her view of the Haicang PX project” ... “Believe the Communist Party, believe the municipal government; believe advanced science and believe the experts”. Other interviews argued for “resolutely opposing” and “resolutely stopping” the “illegal demonstrations and marches”.

On June 6th, another near-full page of reporting repeats the message above, with another strong emphasis on the issue of real-estate. The reporting on June 7th features a piece on a hastily-issued explanatory booklet on the truth about PX. The page lead story is a summary of a letter from CPPCC member and anti-PX signatory Yang Jingcheng. Though it features no original quotes, Yang is said to also have “a lot of concerns” about environmental degradation and safety but offers criticism of the “illegal demonstration” which has been “hugely damaging” (*pohaixing jida*)’ to the city (Xiamen Daily, 2007I). June 8th sees the PX issue brought to an end in terms of local media coverage. A single page-two article features coverage of the news conference, held the previous day, where the deputy secretary general of the municipal government essentially announced that the national agency, SEPA, would assume responsibility for conducting a new EIA. Though the story is by-lined as having been written by an (unnamed) local reporter, it is, for the first time, predominantly drawn from Xinhua agency copy.

Extra-linguistic strategies

There are several extra-linguistic strategies worthy of specific note in the *Xiamen Daily*’s reporting on the PX protests. The newspaper’s use of images is particularly striking. PX articles on June 1st and 2nd are printed beside ostensibly unrelated news stories which carry images of pristine urban environments depicting attractive modern developments alongside luxuriant green lawns and trickling waterfalls. The visual idiom is redolent of real estate imagery, though – unlike most modern Chinese

real estate advertising¹²⁴ – the images have not been overtly doctored as both show buildings appearing through a grey and hazy background. The June 2nd article prominently point to Xiamen’s ‘clean and beautiful’ (*qingxin, meili*) environment and depicts families lazing on a patch of grass.

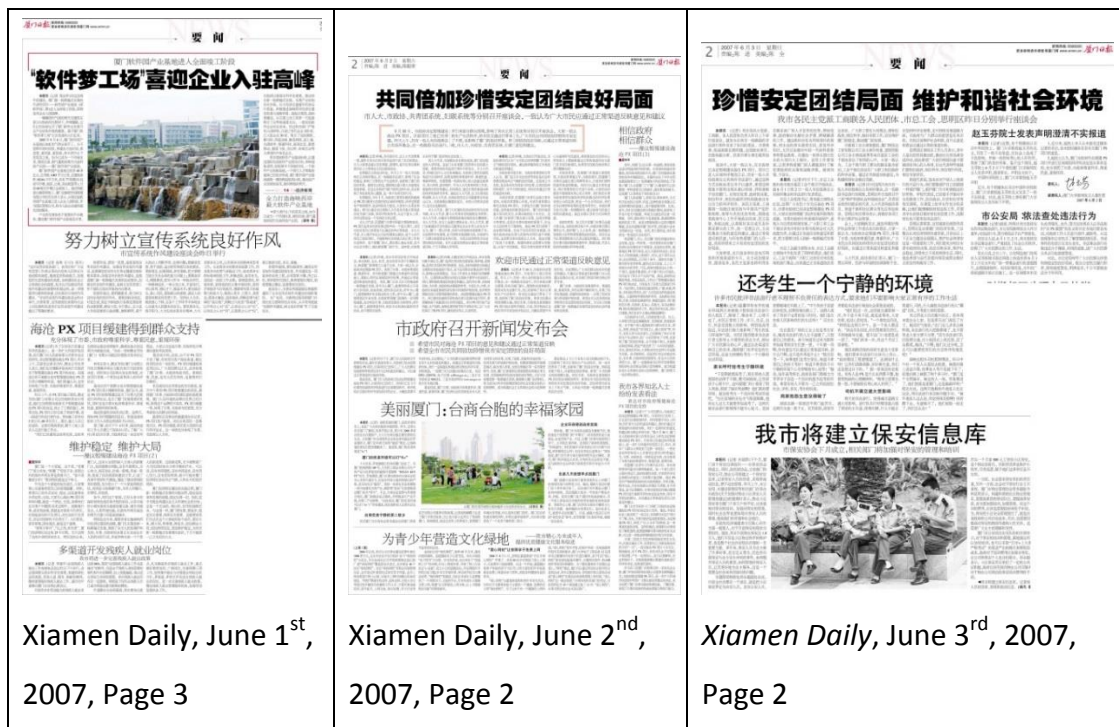


IMAGE 2: XIAMEN DAILY’S PRIMARY PX PROTEST COVERAGE, JUN 1-3

The image on page 2 of the June 3rd newspaper again has an obvious connection with the PX protest, though, again, the article is apparently unrelated. It depicts police officers at rest – an obviously benevolent impression – beside a headline announcing the imminent establishment of a ‘police information bank’ which was to record performance data on individual officers.

National Reporting

The brewing controversy in Xiamen had manifestly not been ruled a ‘red-line’ subject prior to the protest. The huge reduction in reporting *following* the protest indicates the likely presence of propaganda instructions, though the continued, though

¹²⁴ The author lived in China between 2003 and 2008 and was exposed to numerous real estate advertisements during this period, on billboards, brochure mailshots and media advertising. There was a pronounced tendency for developers to take an artist’s impression of the sale property and superimpose it onto an unrealistic background – a deserted bay, a tropical beach or a blue lagoon, for example – which was sharply at odds with the urban and congested milieu in which the property was actually located.

irregular, appearance of articles in the mainland press during June suggests that the story was still considered parochial enough to be covered by senior publications, albeit highly cautiously.

The most significant reporting prior to the protests was made by newspapers within the Nanfang Group. The *Southern Metropolis Daily's* (SMD) published a lengthy report on May 29th, building on the reports in the *China Business News* and the Xinhua-associated *Oriental Outlook Weekly* but, uniquely, placing a clear focus on the viral spread of an SMS text message calling for a protest, which was quoted in full, and pointing to user comments on its own news website as a source to confirm the scale and impact of the SMS message's viral spread.

The SMD's sister weekly, *Southern Weekend*, published a long investigative piece on May 31st, on the eve of the protest. This also repeated the SMS content, but claimed Xinhua as its source, despite the content being widely available online. The article is particularly hostile in its attitude toward Xiamen authorities. The report mentions censorship explicitly in reference to blogger and sometime newspaper columnist, Lian Yue.

He was less subject to pressure from the Propaganda Department than his colleagues at Xiamen's newspapers and television stations, who risked losing their salaries, health insurance, housing subsidies and other benefits if they defied orders from the censors. (Zhu 2007)

The story also reports attempts by the propaganda department in Xiamen to stifle non-local journalists.

They thought they could control the national media the same way they controlled the media in Xiamen," one of them recalled, speaking on condition of anonymity out of fear the Xiamen censors could still harm him or his editors. (ibid)

The occurrence of street protest on June 1st evidently made the story highly sensitive, though some national publishers continued to report it. Articles in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* on June 2nd borrow heavily from *Xiamen Daily's* own reporting. An online report by *Caijing* on June 4th, meanwhile, assiduously avoids all mention of the

protest, but offers substantial detail on the procedural aspects of the PX plant's planning application. On June 5th, an editorial in the Shanghai-based *Oriental Morning Post* contained a vague reference to the PX protestors. The events in Xiamen were a "true portrayal of the fact that the problem of environmental degradation has not been resolved from a systemic standpoint", further highlighting aspects of political process (Tong, 2007). The objections of members of the CPPCC, academics and citizens were futile (*wuji yushi*) in effecting change in Xiamen. "Only when SMS messages were rapidly exchanged was there a turnaround" (*ibid*). Notably, there is no direct mention of the protest itself.

A lengthy feature article in the Beijing-based *China Economic Times* (*zhongguo jingji shibao*) appeared on June 5th. The newspaper is affiliated with the Development Research Center of the State Council, an elite think tank based in Beijing. It too did not reference the protest directly, but referred, in its introduction to "public agitation", and to the fact that the "controversy had not been stopped [by the decision to suspend construction]" (*zhengyi bing meiyou yinci er tingxi*) (*China Economic Times*, 2007). The article goes into considerable detail around the planning and financing of the proposed PX project, and claims to 'reveal' that complaints had been expressed by residents on Haicang for many months prior to the protest, but that the 'channels [of communication] were not smooth' (*qudao bu changtong*). The article, notably, also directly reports the fact that Xiamen authorities removed copies of a 'legally sold' (*hefa xiaoshou*) Hong Kong news magazine, though does not name the magazine as *Phoenix Weekly* (*fenghuang zhoukan*).

On June 7th, a *Southern Weekend* editorial by Xiao Shu¹²⁵ strongly praises central government but repeatedly cited "disorderly development of the chemical industry" and advocates greater public involvement in the process. The headline borrows the language used by the Xiamen authorities but suggests that the government must follow "the people's will" (*minyi*), suggesting that the Xiamen government's claim to *already* be 'listening to the people's will' is overstated. The editorial deploys the

¹²⁵ Xiao Shu went on to become a key figure in the so-called *New Citizens Movement* (*Xingongmin Yundong*), a collective of lawyers, journalists and activist, many of whom were subject to arrest and detention in 2013/4, including the group's founding member, Xu Zhiyong.

political safe concept of 'scientific development' but does so ambiguously. At one point, there appears to be some scorn of the notion "scientific development":

Local industrial policies which follow the concept of scientific development, in fact, often directly violate local people's environmental rights, property rights, and even their basic right to survival. (Xiao, 2007)

The author goes on to argue that the 'people' (*renmin*) are the 'firmest supporters' (*zui jianding de yonghuzhe*) of scientific development. Thus safety is sought through strict adherence to an established political concept, but discussion of that concept implies a criticism of venal local officials.

China Newsweek, a magazine published by Xinhua, carried a lengthy story on the PX crisis in Xiamen on June 11th. It is extremely positive in its reporting of protestors, and correspondingly hostile to the government in Xiamen. It begins with a story of a Xiamen citizen who received the aforementioned SMS and dismissed its outlandish elements after independent research. It features detailed description of their role in the protest: "From the city government to South Hubin Road, Ye Zi and her uncle's family followed a procession of nearly 1,000 people, and shouted slogans with them". The dignity of the protestor is then contrasted with the Xiamen media's portrayal:

That night, Ye Zi found related news on the scrolling tickers of all of Xiamen's TV stations. But what she thought was just a gentle way of using a 'walk' to express her wishes was defined by the Xiamen PSB as an 'illegal mass demonstration' that 'seriously disrupted public order and disturbed the lives and work of the general public.' (Xie, 2007)

The article features several other interviews with individual protestors, who are given the protection of pseudonyms and portrayed as reasonable, good-natured and constructive in their efforts to express their opinion. The article also features direct mention of the 'screening' of SMS messages, the forced closure of BBS forums and contains this transparently allegorical final line:

At this time, the Xiamen municipal government had not revealed to citizens any further information regarding the PX project, so the "Boycott

PX, Protect Xiamen" feeling circulated by SMS gradually covered Xiamen, whose summer sun was unobscured by rain or thunder. (ibid)

Inverting a metaphor used previously by *Xiamen Daily* columnist Xia Zhongping, here SMS information is presented as being 'sunny' and transparent, while intervention by local government is tantamount to the suppression of 'rain' or 'thunder'.

The article's final line makes plain where the sympathies of editorial staff lie: 'Strolling', Anti-PX, yellow scarves...these became the symbols of the citizens' *gentle expression of their opinions*" [author's italics] (ibid).

A lengthy article in *Caijing* on June 26th also deploys weather metaphors and, unlike its earlier report on June 4th, makes direct reference to the protest which it describes in the first line as a 'spontaneous gathering'. Citizens were said to have 'marched in protest' and rather than a misunderstanding, the incident was characterised as a 'huge controversy'. Though protest is mentioned repeatedly in the first paragraph of the article, the protest is skipped during a later chronology of events, and is referred to merely as an 'event' (*shi*). The article's chief focus is on procedural fairness and it mentions several potentially sensitive aspects of the case, including alleged problems in finding suitable contractors to conduct the new EIA, and wider issues around corruption and poor practices in the development of a major infrastructure project. There are specific references to the superiority of comparable systems in the US. Though much of this part of the article does not specifically mention Xiamen itself, the city is mentioned again in the final lines:

In Xiamen's PX storm, all the information that should have been made public is contained within a 'black box'. Though the Xiamen municipal government widely distributed a "PX: What You Should Know?" brochure after the event, it contained only basic scientific facts and is obviously a far cry from the true knowledge and participation that the public demands. (Long et al, 2007)

Summary

The many narratives of the Xiamen PX protest that now exist pay lip service to the role of the press. The description of coverage within the national press indicates that

a substantial amount of coverage was generated in mainstream media. Though, prior to the protest, there is clear symbiosis between online comment and mainstream coverage, after the protest itself mainstream publications continued to report the incident, albeit under evident reporting restrictions, and kept the issue in the headlines, especially in December.

An analysis of news texts is insufficient to provide a definitive description and an explanation of propaganda strategies at various tiers of the Chinese administration during this event. However, there are some limited conclusions that may be drawn.

Firstly, and most obvious, there was a clear rift between national publications and local media in their mediation of the protest event. These differences were manifest in the way the protests were reported and the language employed. This will be discussed further in the next section.

In terms of local reporting, the Xiamen government had initially dealt with the brewing controversy by suppressing reporting – either actively or implicitly – but was seemingly forced to enter into a public debate by the sheer number of non-local media. Once a threshold had been breached, local media conducted a large amount of reporting in the days before and after the protest in an obvious attempt to control the discourse. After an initial attempt to present a case in the commercial media, the local media strategy was enacted exclusively by the party organ, the *Xiamen Daily*, its voice reflecting the propaganda strategy of local government, and replicated in other local media.

The strategy, such as can be discerned, initially revolved around an escalation of threat as the day of the protest approached, together with attempts to systematically rebut the various criticisms voiced by protestors. The outbreak of protest on June 1st led to two notable propaganda strategies, working to a singular purpose.

Firstly, there was a rapid, and somewhat concessionary, re-articulation of the core propaganda message. Prior to the protest, the key propaganda message was that, essentially, ‘public opinion exists, but it was ‘ill-informed’. With the outbreak of protest, this moved to the argument that ‘the government respects public opinion and science’ - a subtle change as it implies that, unless opinion is scientifically-based,

it is likely to be wrong. Finally, by the end of the street protest, the propaganda line became ‘the government respects public opinion, science and environmental protection’, by far the most concessionary and inclusive.

Secondly, after initial reports which featured only the words of the political leadership, interviews with locals were used widely in the days after the protest, albeit in terms of interviews where the language employed never deviated from the ‘official’. Reporting of the detrimental impact on real estate was notable and, likely, a riposte to those who had been *protesting* on grounds of the drop in value of their own homes. Equally notable was the manner in which the local press sought to appropriate voices of two of the senior opponents of the PX plant. Zhao Yufen’s signed statement of support for the government came first on June 3rd, followed by a summary of a letter sent by local politician Yang Jingcheng on June 8th.

The strategy at work in the messages above is one of absolute inclusiveness. There is an attempt to generate a media screen in which all of the identifiable elements involved in protest are represented within the media frame and are drawn into a state of scarcely credible harmony.

An adjunct to this strategy was the clear move away from the reporting of official meetings, in the final days of May, and a diversification of tactics as the protest got underway in the early days of June. This included ostensible reportage – reports from the PX site, interviews with ‘regular’ citizens, substantial reporting of ‘question and answer’ formatted copy, drawn from media-wide press conferences, and the use of a strident, literary editorial voice. Throughout this period, however, the newspaper was entirely in control of its own output, with each story by-lined as having been written by a newspaper staffer, albeit an unnamed staffer. This changed on June 8th when the newspaper used Xinhua copy for the first time. This coincided with the arrival of representatives of the NDRC in Xiamen and the decision, presumably taken in Beijing, to hand control of the EIA inspection to a national authority. This suggests strongly that the operation of the Xiamen press parallels that of the local government. One might argue that Xiamen, as one of Deng Xiaoping’s early Special Economic Zones, is run on a “mission control basis” (Kenny, 2014) with local officials and planners free to meet centrally-mandated targets and face down challenges on their own. However,

when central authorities override local decision making and step in, local media – like local government – becomes a conduit for the work of higher authorities.

Nationally, reporting, both before and after the outbreak of the protest, was predominantly conducted by weekly news magazines with national-level affiliations. The newspapers of the Nanfang Group published important stories in the run-up to the protest, but the *Southern Metropolis Daily* and *Oriental Morning Post* limited themselves to using official copy from Xiamen after the protest or made brief and often oblique references through the prism of another environmental story occurring at the same time, the pollution in the lakes of Wuxi in Jiangsu province.

Between June 2nd and June 7th, the presence of reporting restrictions can clearly be traced. There are several attempts to reference some of the core issues involved in the protest – pollution, the opacity of planning – in terms of editorials or comment pieces, but specific mentions of Xiamen are absent. The only reports of the protests, or the central issue, outside Xiamen during this time used identical copy to that in the *Xiamen Daily*¹²⁶.

Reporting restrictions seem to ease on June 8th when SEPA is given control of the EIA review process and Xiamen reappears in terms of news coverage and editorialising.

Perhaps the clearest conclusion from the national reporting of the Xiamen PX protest is the alliance between the non-Xiamen commercial press and centrally-affiliated publications. Much of the serious investigative work conducted within the mainland media was conducted by commercial outlets such as *Southern Weekend* and *Caijing* but equally important were the stories in the *Oriental Outlook Weekly* and *Newsweek* which, while operating at the commercial end of the market, benefitted from affiliations with the national Xinhua news service, as well as the *China Economic Times*, which is supervised by an administrative body directly associated with the State Council. It is notable that, once the protest had taken place, it was *only* the Beijing-based publications with elite affiliations that published investigative pieces on the controversy. Even the often freewheeling Nanfang Group publications were quietened. When the local media ceased reporting after June 8th, publications

¹²⁶ Both the *People's Daily* website and the *Southern Metropolis Daily* carried short news stories during this period.

including *Caijing* and *Newsweek* – produced articles that were excoriating of the attitude of local government and highly sympathetic to protestors. Particularly notable was the explicit criticism by the State Council-affiliated *China Economic Times* and the Xinhua-published magazine *Newsweek* of attempts at media censorship.

These intra-media dynamics are an important, and previously unacknowledged, aspect of the Xiamen PX protest. This negotiation generated a climate of media openness that, on the one hand, allowed news of the protests to be communicated through official media, and, secondly, allowed the events to be reflected on and editorialised prominently in mainstream Chinese news publications.

News Discourse Analysis – Xiamen Media

This section examines the specific construction of the core propaganda planks of Xiamen media reporting, described in the previous section by way of a news discourse analysis. This analysis seeks to reveal the underlying structures of the propaganda framework and how these evolve and change, both during this particular protest episode, but also in relation to the other protests considered in this thesis.

The construction of ‘us’ and ‘them’

“Language and discourse have a broad range of structural possibilities to emphasize and de-emphasize information and hence also the ideologically controlled opinions about groups” (van Dijk, 1995). In terms of media texts, common strategies used for this purpose – identified by van Dijk (ibid), include use of headlines, bold characters (graphical structures), ordering strategies (first and later, higher and lower, bigger and smaller), control of word order, topicalisation, clausal relations (syntactic structures), use of positive or negative words (lexical style), over- and under-statement (rhetoric), and assertions or denials (pragmatics). Some of these aspects will be explored in this section.

The Press-Party ‘we’

The first aspect in the construction of the ‘we’ in the local Xiamen’s media reporting of the PX ‘issue’ (*wenti*) is the implied unity between the press and the party. As is often – though not always – the case in reporting by party newspapers, the *Xiamen Daily’s* first article on PX makes no typographical distinction between the quoted

speech of Party Secretary He Lifeng and the report's authorial voice. The report begins with a third person reference to certain leaders having met in Haicang. In the third paragraph, He Lifeng is apparently quoted in the form of a paraphrase (i.e. there are no quotation marks). However, at the end of this sentence there is no attempt to restate the identity of the speaker, even though the collective pronoun 'we' is used and the sentence is unambiguously a quote ("we will offer understanding and concern to their feelings and desires"). The identity of the 'we' is thus implied to be the Party Secretary himself, the other named leaders, the journalist, and the newspaper.

In the *Xiamen Daily's* article the following day, 'the city' becomes the agent of decision-making, rather than leaders or individuals: "The city has decided to..." (*wo shi jue ding*) reads the headline. Later, there is a reference to the "belief within the city..." (*shi li ren wei*). This hints at one of the article's underlying linguistic frameworks which obfuscates actors and elides apparent differences between the parties involved in the apparent conflict. Such sentences are resonant of Link's 'official language' (Link, 2013a) and it would, of course, be impossible to conceive of them being used socially.

Finally, the absence of named authors for all of the news stories between May 31st and June 7th may be viewed as another mechanism of the unification of press and party. The authorial voice is 'this newspaper' (*ben bao*).

The local 'we' and the national 'them'

At times in local reporting, the 'we' is constructed as a local force operating against an implied or explicit national 'them'. For example, *Xiamen Daily's* May 31st editorial makes conspicuous use of the collective pronoun, 'we' to establish an adherence to local government but to hint at a distinction from national government: "*we* [author's italics] believe that correct opinions and well-intentioned advice brings great benefits. Party and city leaders place great importance on this and respect science and respect the will of the people". Later, the same collective pronoun is used to suggest a distance from central government bodies:

We have learned from answers given to journalists by spokespeople from the Municipal Development and Reform Commission and the Municipal

Environmental Protection Bureau that the produce of PX projects are regarded as being of urgent national need. (Xia, 2007a)

This trope continues during the crisis when much is made of Xiamen's 2005 title as the 'First Civilized City of China'. "Why," wonders *Xiamen Daily* commentator Xia Zhongping, "did Xiamen sprout forth amid such intense competition to stand on the highest podium of Chinese civilisation? Many media spontaneously provided the answer: 'Because Xiameners love Xiamen'" (ibid). The implication is that the residents of other cities may not be as self-respecting and appreciative of their city as Xiameners are.

The expanding 'we'

The precise definition of the 'we' in the early stages of reporting is left unclear, with the assumption being that the voice of 'the party' is speaking through media reporting. However, this rapidly changes after the protest with a clear effort to expand this voice as widely as possible. The primary reports on the two days of the strikes report condemnation by members of various administrative and political bodies in Xiamen. However, a secondary report on June 3rd also cites five members of the public – a father, a hotel clerk, a taxi driver, an elderly resident and a shop keeper – who each deploy official *tifa*. By June 3rd, thus, readers of the *Xiamen Daily* had heard the same message – with little variation – from the Party Secretary [**municipal party**], the municipal CPPCC [**municipal government**], the Municipal People's Congress [**neighbourhood administrative structure**], the Communist Youth League [**young people**], the Women's Union [**women**], democratic parties [**non-Party politicians**], federations of industry [**trade unionists**], people's organizations [**social organisations**], and specific citizen representatives of **family, tourism, labour, the elderly** and **small business**.

Majorities and minorities

The comment pieces by Xia Zhongping published in the *Xiamen Daily* lean heavily on the ambiguous dichotomy between the politically-loaded and the terms 'majority' and 'minority'.

Of course, rallies and marches are basic democratic rights of citizens. The country's constitution clearly stipulated that citizens have the freedom to assemble, march and demonstrate. However, whether one assembles or demonstrates, the precondition is that it is carried out in strict compliance with the law of the country, and one must preserve social stability and public order. ...I'm afraid to say that the vast majority of people participating in the assemblies and marches are still in the dark, and perhaps are not aware that their actions have violated the law (Xia, 2007b)

Despite explicitly recognising that the 'vast majority' are in the dark and, implicitly, recognising the size and scale of the marches, the author goes on to ominously argue that the "government has been extremely restrained in its response to the assembling and marching activities participated in by an *extreme minority* [author's italics]". Such is the determination to contrast these two ambiguously defined terms that the coherence of the argument is seemingly compromised. It seems semantically implausible to identify a "vast majority" of marchers who are then called an "extreme minority". The term is invoked in another explicit threat:

...for the minority of citizens who have marched on the street and instigated trouble without knowing either the truth or the law, the law will prove to be relentless and is certain to deliver severe punishment. (ibid)

Exploitation of the terms 'majority' and 'minority' is also used in the threats issued by security forces after the end of the strike. The PSB statement insists the "extreme minority" (*jishao shu ren*) will be "punished according to the law" (*yifa yingyu chufa*) but the definition is broad. Cited offenders are given as those who had continued marching on June 2nd; who deliberately confused the situation (*youyi hunxiao shiting*); or who had instigated and organised the marches and even "refused to follow orders". A three day amnesty period is given in which those who "take the initiative in briefing [the PSB] on the issues would be treated leniently according to the law", while those who refuse to come forward within three days, brief on the issues and accept punishment would be investigated and punished severely, according to the law". The efficacy of such a strategy would seem to rely on strategic division. It is highly unlikely that the authorities could punish everyone who marched, so it is only an "extreme

minority” who need worry. However, a reading of the text would suggest that *everyone* who marched on June 2nd may be considered part of that “extreme minority”.

The construction of protestors

Protestors are diminished by imprecision and ambiguity, and implied irrelevance. Prior to the outbreak of protests, the government had identified “some views and opinions” (*yixie kanfa he yijian*) among “some scholars and citizens” (*youxie xuezhe, shimin*). In the *Xiamen Daily*’s first series of protest reports on Jun 2nd, street protestors have become “some people” (*yixie ren*). Moreover, they had marched “on sections of some streets” (*zai yixie luduan*).

The scale of protests is tacitly acknowledged, though diminished in the *Xiamen Daily*’s standfirst on June 2nd which explains that these activities had “caused onlookers to gather” (*qilai bufen gongzhong weiguan*), suggesting that most people were not protesting but were rather just looking. It was, thus, an “extreme minority” (*shaoshu ren*) who had hijacked the event to cause trouble. No indication is given as to who these people may be or what their intentions may be.

Ambiguity is also a routine tactic. Reports on June 4th give a hint of who “people with ulterior motives” – a phrase first introduced on June 2nd and used frequently in Party condemnation of perceived anti-Party forces – might be but it is highly ambiguous. “They are using environmentalism to cover up their stink of money. I hate them,” reports a Netizen. The quoted speaker clearly has identified the culprit, but the article neglects to establish the connection between the clues. This tactic, of hinting at malfeasance while omitting specific accusations, has the effect of spreading the suspicion widely. A specific accusation of corruption, or even an identification of what *kind* of corruption is being discussed, would limit the potential impact. As it is, anybody who has economic concerns appears damned.

Understanding and ‘understanding’

The *Xiamen Daily* establishes a contrast between the verbs *lijie* and *liaojie*. In Mandarin Chinese, the two both may be roughly translated as ‘to understand’. However, the former – *lijie* – connotes a depth of understanding, while the latter –

liaojie – may refer more simply to a more superficial awareness of, or knowledge of, an idea, phenomenon or feeling. Thus, before protest erupts, dissenters are described as having insufficient ‘awareness’ – *liaojie* – while the municipal government, in its benevolent wisdom, ‘understands’ – *lijie* – that dissenting views and opinions are heartfelt and indicate a love of the city. The asymmetry of ‘understanding’ is a rhetorical strategy employed through local reporting on the protest.

In early reporting, one of the matters which the ambiguous ‘we’ – discussed above – is said to have ‘understood’ was the dispute, though the lack of precision in defining the dispute, or pointing to its constituent elements, renders the claim somewhat nonsensical. In typically euphemistic language, the dispute is labelled as ‘contradictions and problems’ (*maodun he wenti*). There is no attempt to be more specific about what such ‘contradictions and problems’ may specifically point to and, as such, it is difficult to understand how a claim of ‘understanding’ can be justified. What is clear, however, is the manner in which obfuscation of the specific problem is a rhetorical strategy. In the media field, true understanding is reserved for leadership. This implication is repeated in *Xiamen Daily*’s front page comment piece on May 31st. It purports to explain the newly introduced propaganda plank, introduced in the headline of the article but does so in a way that makes it plain that real understanding cannot be conveyed through words alone.

*What exactly is ‘Respect for Science’? We believe it is respecting science!;
What exactly is ‘Respect for popular opinion’? We believe it is respecting
popular opinion! (Xia, 2007a)*

Such an attempt to explain a straightforward slogan has the effect of both highlighting its emptiness and drawing attention to the impossibility of refutation. This idiom employed in this phrase has an unmistakable condescension about it; it purports to render the complex simple but is almost comical in its vapidness.

The same comment piece is printed on the front page within an eye-catching red box. The editorial’s headline establishes a new eight-character slogan which identifies two

competing pressures and, ostensibly, stresses their equal worth: “Respect Science, Respect Popular Will” (*zunzhong kexue, zunzhong renyi*).

Some scholars and citizens have raised certain views and opinions in regard to the Haicang PX Project... We believe that correct opinions and well-intentioned advice brings great benefits. Party and city leaders place great importance on this and respect science and respect the will of the people. (ibid)

The following comments, however, undermine the notion that ‘government will’ and ‘popular will’ are equal partners:

As the saying goes: when matters are not clear, there is always unease. Because some members of the public do not know much about the decision-making process and environmental assessment, and do not understand [the full picture], they have used different methods to express a variety of views and opinions which are based on their interest in, and care for, Haicang’s environment. (ibid)

Thus, science is comprehensive and even handed, while the popular will, though replete with good intentions, suffers from knowledge deficit. The comment piece goes on to join up the opening phrase of the passage by implying that absolute transparency has facilitated a feeling of inner peace among the populace: “Nowadays we write reports for the public which discuss problems with crystal clarity; with innumerable channels of communication open, the truth is able to be made clear and [we] believe this will bring everybody peace of mind” (ibid). Such peace is immediately contrasted with the implied menace that derives from a separation between the masses and government: “It is quite a different matter for those individuals who deliberately confuse the senses and who instigate antagonism between the government and the masses. We believe the broad public will keep its eyes open and has the ability to differentiate between truth and falsehood and separate black from white” (ibid). Thus understanding is reduced to binaries between correct and incorrect positions.

Deviance

The most frequently cited suggestion of deviance is the repeated use of the notion of the safety and desirability of ‘normal channels’ after protests have begun on June 2nd. Such a description generates the implied existence of ‘abnormal channels’, such as public protest, though these are not named.

The page two lead in the *Xiamen Daily* on June 2nd reports vice chairman of the municipal people’s congress, Du Mingcong suggests, suggesting the hot weather was likely to affect the people’s “physical and psychological health” (*shenxin jiankang*), an attempt to link the protest with mental deviance (Xiamen Daily, 2007c).

There is later an accusation of criminal deviance in the PSB statement printed on June 3rd. This is the first explicit reference to online activity. Secondly, there is an accusation that “an illegally organised ‘Anti-PX Union’ had anonymously telephoned the mayor’s office to issue threats”. The naming of specific, responsible people, is a key plank of social and political organisation and control in China (Wang, 2012), and thus the idea of an ‘anonymous’ but specific threat is to be regarded as particularly egregious. This is notwithstanding that much local reporting itself uses techniques, described above, to obscure the specific source of authority in the official response.

News Discourse Analysis – National Media

The construction of ‘us’ and ‘them’

As has been previously discussed, it was the elite, Beijing-based news magazines which persisted in coverage of the Xiamen PX controversy in the immediate aftermath of the protests in early June. The three major investigative articles, published by non-Party news magazines in the wake of the protest¹²⁷ adopt an interrogatory position, seeking answers from ‘insiders’ (*chiqing ren*) but finding they are ‘still in the dark’ when it comes to matter of planning and process. Such a stance is, of course, standard in ostensible ‘investigative’ reporting. However, the portrayal of the public – and sometimes, explicitly, protestors – as having the same unanswered questions undoubtedly seeks to establish the ‘us’ as press-people.

¹²⁷ *China Economic Times* on June 6th, *China Newsweek* on June 11th and *Caijing* on June 26th.

Rather than working on behalf of the people, or pursuing questions overlooked by others, the reporters explicitly use the same language to describe their quest and that of the protestors. *Caijing*, *China Economic Times* and *Newsweek* all take such an approach. The *China Economic Times* goes so far as to claim that “as the media persisted in its focus, it was on the newsstand that the great waves of the PX project controversy were unleashed” (China Economic Times, 2007). Thus, in this construction, journalists and the protestors of Xiamen become part of the same alliance.

Construction of protestors

Protestors in these series of articles are portrayed consistently in a positive light. The *Newsweek* article begins with a description of one protestor, described as a “gentle person who’s never been one to get excited”. She is described exchanging an email with a friend concerning the accusations against the PX plant. Such online communication is portrayed as non-threatening and, importantly, subject to her reasoned and considered criticism. “Things were not as sensational as the email made them out to be”. The article generates a dramatic sense of self-sacrifice – despite a natural timidity and fear, she acts for good of her ‘three-year-old son’ in going out to protest. When the protestor returns home to find her actions labelled as illegal, the article suggests, sympathetically, a sense of injustice.

That night, Ye Zi found related news on the scrolling tickers of all of Xiamen's TV stations. But what she thought was just a gentle way of using a "walk" to express her wishes was defined by the Xiamen PSB as an "illegal mass demonstration" that "seriously disrupted public order and disturbed the lives and work of the general public. (Xie, 2007)

The same article describes the graffiti artist – whose painted protest slogans were central to the online propagation of the story – as “sensitive, cowardly individual searching for his own voice”. A ‘colleague’, reports feeling a sense of belonging when he sees online calls: “I’ve finally found an organization,” reports an unnamed source. Thus protestors are presented as powerless and disenfranchised individuals who were keen to merely ‘find a voice’ and ‘express wishes’. The article ends with the magazine describing their actions, in summary, as a ‘gentle expression of opinions’,

which stands in stark contrast to the way the protestors were categorised in local media.

Caijing's June 26th article opens with a brief summary of the protest itself, reported as involving 'thousands of protestors...spontaneously gathering', and 'marching in protest' (Long et al, 2007). The article tones down specific references to the protest, even omitting it from a later chronology which spanned the end of May and administrative machinations in early June. Later, adopting a politically-safe formulation, the incident is said to have 'caused a high-degree of social concern'. This then morphs into the 'local people responding in an increasingly fierce manner' (*dangdi minzhong fanying yuelaiyue jilie*). Thus in both descriptors, all of Xiamen is implied to have been involved, rather than any specific sub-strata of the local population.

Online Sources

The news magazines take a varied attitude to online communications. The *Newsweek* article (Xie, 2007) relegates the importance of the widely-covered SMS message which is frequently claimed to have caused the protest. The article discusses its exaggerations. However, protestors are reported as having seen it, critiqued it, dismissed it, and marched anyway. Thus the protest issue is framed as bigger than the 'exaggerated' online scandal and imbued with greater substance as a result. Such an approach obviously implies tacit acceptance of the fact that online communications are unreliable and riddled with potential problems. However, they are presented as being part of a communications mix which is otherwise criticised for being too opaque.

Elsewhere in the *Newsweek* article, online communications are explicitly acknowledged as a reason for why the protests occurred, but – importantly – also recognised as playing a part in their conclusion too. The report tangentially reports the threats of the local PSB through the eyes of one of the protestors, but – through positioning within the story – acknowledges conciliatory online voices as encouraging an end to the street action.

Though its June 5th editorial does not go into specific detail on the Xiamen PX project, the *Oriental Morning Post* begins its commentary by pointing at the ‘intervention of a million text messages’ (Tong, 2007). There is no acknowledgment that these translated to action at street-level, but the reference to a large quantity of unofficial, mobile communications is, seemingly, sanctioned.

The *China Economic Times*’ story on June 5th is explicit in presenting online activity as being the only way to get the ‘relevant departments’ concern and attention (China Economic Times, 2007).

Conclusions

The coverage of the Xiamen PX protest is heavily polarised. Propaganda diktat, as discussed above, appears to have silenced regional newspaper reporting of the issue, and so local media dictated presentation of the protest in the days immediately following the street action. Those publications which do report the protest between June 2nd and 5th source reports from Xiamen media. The fact that *Southern Weekend* issues a report on June 7th which does not mention the protest at all suggests that, even as late as this date, reporting restrictions are in place, despite the investigative and somewhat critical work undertaken by the *China Economic Times*.

Local reports deploy various techniques and strategies to present protestors as deviant and operating beyond what may be considered reasonable behaviour. In stark contrast, the elite news magazines which, sporadically, take up the story later in June make almost the polar opposite case, suggesting protest is justified and constructively assisted by online and mobile media. Xinhua’s *Newsweek*, the semi-independent *Caijing* and the national Development Research Centre-affiliated *China Economic Times* all demonstrate a willingness to explicitly criticise local government. Each aligns with protestors, via a distancing of protestors from extreme ideas; by emphasising the nobility of aims; and by explicitly making the suppression of information one of the core problems to be addressed. In such a strategy, the issue of environmental damage and chemical toxicity – ostensibly the reason the protest broke out in the first place – is barely discernible. Rather, it is the administrative process and information opacity that form the background to the protest.

Chapter Conclusions

This chapter has provided a systematic account of the mainstream press reporting around the siting of a PX plant in Xiamen in 2007 and the controversy it stirred. The research has been conducted in two broad areas. Firstly, by scrutinizing the manner in which the mediation of the event unfolded among the constituent parts of the Chinese press, it is possible to draw tentative conclusions about the manner in which the constituent parts of the press were instrumentalised by various actors, and from this emerges a complex picture in which any simple, uniform description of the action of the 'Chinese press' – used in many studies of Xiamen PX – is rendered virtually meaningless. As has been revealed, the Chinese press behaved in a polarised manner towards the crisis, with local media dictating reporting during the protest, and the investigative reporting among Beijing-based news magazines reframing the issue in a fairly radical way shortly after the end of the protest.

The second strand of analysis was conducted in the linguistic sphere, and followed from a granular analysis of the way words were used to re-construct the real-world conflict within the mainstream media frame, and how different parts of the press approached this task. It has identified some similarities and divisions between reporting methods between local and non-local media and examined linguistic strategies using a news discourse analysis.

As suggested in the introduction, it was not the intention of this chapter to understand the factors which allowed the PX protest to occur and gain traction. Others (Zhang, 2009; Ansfield, 2013) have pointed to the critical importance of elite political actors at the outset of the process and the online interventions of well-known media commentators such as Lian Yue and Xiao Shu. Rather, this analysis looks at the way the controversy was mediated through various actors within the national press. The Xiamen protest is regarded by some observers as being seminal in changing local and national attitudes towards this kind of crisis reporting. Qian and Bandurski argue for a link with Hu Jintao's June 2008 media policy speech in which he advocated that party media should play a stronger role in reporting crises early to remove the initiative from commercial publications (2011: 70). This analysis suggests that, while commercial outlets such as *Southern Weekend* and *Caijing* certainly played

a significant role in the reporting of the protest, two news magazines with elite official affiliations - *China Newsweek* and the *China Economic Times* had – if anything, a more significant role to play.

Chapter 7: The Chongqing Taxi Strike

Protest Narrative

Beginning early on November 3rd and lasting for just over 48 hours, a taxi strike in the southwest municipality of Chongqing¹²⁸ caused widespread transport disruption, receiving national attention and appearing to prompt a series of copycat strikes in several cities across China. It was hailed as a seminal moment for both media openness and protest management by professional commentators inside and outside of China.

Approximately 8,000 vehicles, drawn from 35 different taxi companies, were simultaneously stood down in the early hours of 3rd. By the morning rush-hour, public transport networks were choked with commuters, who had no other way to move around what is a largely mountainous city¹²⁹. Reports suggest there was some minor violence, with damage to vehicles recorded and a number of arrests made, though the strike appears to have been otherwise peaceful. Xinhua reporting indicates that 10,000 police and security personnel were sent to the street to attempt to control the situation. Chinese law does not formally acknowledge the legitimacy of strikes made outside the Party-controlled All-China Federation of Trade Unions (*zhonghua quanguo zonggong hui*) and, as such, the action was essentially illegal.

Reporters from Chongqing's Xinhua office began filing reports from the city that same morning and issued regular dispatches over the following days. These were circulated widely around the Chinese press and formed the basis of both reporting by newspaper staffers and editorials by in-house commentators.

The strike ended on November 5th and one day later, Chongqing's Party Secretary, Bo Xilai, met with a number of striking taxi drivers and industry representatives. These meetings took place in front of a large number of journalists from all forms of official media, who reported live from the event via television and the Internet.

¹²⁸ Chongqing is one of four provincial-level 'municipalities' in China, the others being Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai. It is the largest of the four in both physical size and population.

¹²⁹ There is now (2013) a reasonably extensive metro network. In 2008, there was only one functioning mass transit line, a monorail which ran just over 19km from the city centre to the southerly terminus of Yudong

A number of local policy initiatives took shape in the days following the strike, widely reported by local media. Media coverage of the Chongqing taxi strike essentially ended on November 18th when it was announced that two prominent local officials, Ding Chun and Liang Peijun, were being subject to 'administrative punishment'. Both figures had featured prominently in early coverage of the strike outside of Chongqing and were quoted repeatedly by several newspapers.

Context and significance

There are a number of important contextual strands which feed into the Chongqing taxi strike of 2008. The year saw major rioting in Lhasa, Tibet, and other ethnically-Tibetan regions. In September, Sanlu, China's biggest producer of dairy products, was accused of tainting baby milk with toxic additives. Perhaps the most significant event of 2008 in media terms was the Wenchuan Earthquake, which occurred in May, six months prior to the taxi strike. The earthquake seemed to signal a new response to crisis management with many observers surprised at just how freely domestic media reported from the scene at the outset of the crisis. Noticing the mainland Chinese-language reporting around the strike, and tying it to an ostensible trend that had developed over the course of 2008, a Reuters journalist quoted an unnamed academic source "close to propaganda authorities" in asserting that a new principle of, "report the facts quickly, but be cautious on the causes behind the facts" was being employed by news workers (Hornby, 2008). The same report quoted another anonymous official as saying, "It's almost impossible to block anything nowadays when information can spread very quickly on the Internet...We also noticed that it will benefit us if we report the news first."

Finally, 2008 was the year of the Beijing Olympic Games. Prior to the games the broad political environment within which Chinese journalists work became more constricted and there was greater adherence to a Party-mandated line, as is common before planned events of major political significance (Brady, 2010). However, the autumn heralded a loosening of restrictions, and with the 17th Party Congress having taken place the previous autumn, and the Spring Festival and annual meeting of the National People's Consultative Committee several months away, it could be argued that November 2008 was a hiatus *in between* a politically sensitive period.

The presence of Chongqing's then-Party Secretary, Bo Xilai, is an extremely important contextual factor. Son of Bo Yibo, a member of the CCP since the 1920s and one of its most powerful leaders during the 1980s, Bo Xilai had gained national fame and widespread affection for his uncharacteristically relaxed public persona as well as his invocation of Mao-era 'Red' culture and governance. Bo was sometimes seen as a standard bearer of the so-called 'New Left', supporters of strong central government, highly patriotic and in favour of increased redistribution of wealth to ameliorate the inequalities that had arisen from China's economic development since the late 1970s. The economically liberal wing of Chinese politics – though manifestly very different from a US and European 'liberal' position – can be seen as favouring promoting market mechanisms and diminishing, though not necessarily eliminating, state dominance in key fields. The economically liberal faction has been dominant in elite Chinese politics since the early 1990s. For these, and other, reasons, Bo was something of a political outlier during the Hu-Wen era (2003-2012). In 2012 – in one of the most surprising political moves in the PRC's post-reform history – Bo Xilai was removed from his post and put on trial under the CCP's internal disciplinary system on charges of corruption. His trial took place in August 2013 and he was sentenced to life imprisonment the following month.

Though the details of Bo Xilai's subsequent fall are not pertinent to this particular case, the context needs to be considered when analysing the reporting that surrounded the events in 2008, both in terms of ostensible media openness, and also the neo-liberal discourse which is so evident in media reporting.

Finally, several major similar taxi strikes were reported in a number of major cities such as Guangzhou, Sanya, Nanyang and Shantou in November and December 2008. It is not possible to say with any degree of certitude whether the largely sympathetic response received by the media and government in Chongqing encouraged these strikes, though the timing of the strikes suggests the well-publicized Chongqing precedent may have been an important causal factor.

Analysis

This section will analyse the reporting and editorialising around this incident in four distinct geographic regions and across different tiers of the Chinese press. The

nationwide reporting was dominated by Xinhua agency copy, though the fact that reports were widely re-edited and editorialised suggests the absence of stringent national Propaganda Department guidelines. Investigative reporting was undertaken by the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, albeit only after the strike ended.

Chongqing Media

This study looks at the output of the three titles belonging to the Chongqing Daily Newspaper Group. These comprise the *Chongqing Daily* itself, the Chongqing Party Committee's flagship title, and its two commercial off-shoots, the *Chongqing Morning Post* (*chongqing chenbao*) and the *Chongqing Evening Post* (*chongqing wanbao*).

Referencing the strike

All three newspapers cited above printed articles about the incident on November 4th, the first day after the strike began. The *Chongqing Daily* carried two separate stories, one on the front page, another on page two. These two stories were reprinted in both commercial newspapers, which used simple, banner front page headlines which pointed to the content on the inside of the newspaper.

Using 'correct', politically-palatable expression, or *tifa*, has long been a priority for media workers who find themselves writing about, or editing the coverage of, potential sensitive events. Appropriate or inappropriate *tifa* may change over time, something signalled by those senior media outlets with the loftiest political affiliations. In this example, all three newspapers may be regarded as having the same basic affiliation – the Chongqing Party Committee. Indeed, all three newspapers work from the same office in central Chongqing. However, the *Chongqing Daily*, as the party organ, has seniority.

In its two articles on November 4th, the *Chongqing Daily* refers to the strike action itself in three ways. Two are highly euphemistic: the initial reference occurs in the first paragraph of the front page article which refers to an 'obstruction'.

*Yesterday morning at 5.30am, a portion of Chongqing city's cab drivers could not operate normally due to being **obstructed** (shouzu) in their normal activities... (Liu, 2008a)*

The precise word used to denote the ‘obstruction’ is important. *Shouzu* (受阻) – literally, to ‘receive’ a ‘block’ – is a highly generic verb-object (*dongbin jiegou*) construction which indicates a class of action but does not describe it specifically. In this specific instance there is no hint in the word alone to indicate whether this is a natural or man-made ‘block’.

The second euphemistic reference to the strike, deployed by the *Chongqing Daily*, is in the first paragraph of the page two article which refers to an ‘abnormality’ in the operating environment.

Beginning early on November 3rd, an abnormality appeared in the operating situation of the city centre’s taxis. (Chongqing Daily, 2007a)

The third reference is to an ‘outage’ (*tingyun*, literally ‘cessation of travel’), used in the strapline of the inside story and in the quoted comment of both an anonymous ‘journalist’ and an unnamed ‘government news spokesperson’. This is the most direct reference to the strike, though *tingyun* is a relatively neutral term that may be used to describe any transport mishap – halted trains after a rail accident, for example. The term is only referenced directly in the purported quotes by the journalist (“What is the main reason for this partial city centre taxi outage?”), rather than on the part of government. Moreover, the newspaper and government spokesman both couch the term. The strap line to the article reads, “On the partial city centre taxi outage matter” (*jiu chongqing zhuchengqu bufen chuzuche tingyun yi shi*) while the only reference by the spokesman to the term was in claiming, euphemistically, that safety concerns meant some drivers had “no choice but to adopt the outage method” (*budebu caiqu tingyun zuofa*).

The *Chongqing Daily* refers to the strike in three new ways on November 5th, the second day of reporting on the strike, both highly abstract. The first reference is, simply, ‘this thing’ (*zhe yi shiqing*), the second is to a ‘social event’ (*shehui shijian*), and the third and final way is to call the strike an ‘issue’ or ‘problem’ (*wenti*).

Headlines

The copy used by all three newspapers is virtually identical, and derives from reporting by the *Chongqing Daily*. There are subtle changes to the way the headlines are arranged.

Chongqing Daily

| | Page 1 | Page 2 |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Nov 4 th 2008 | <p>Party Committee and Municipal Government Take Active Steps To Ensure Normal Taxi Service Resumes</p> <p>By 4pm yesterday, more than 1,000 taxis had returned to normal service</p> <p>市委市政府采取积极措施 确保出租汽车正常经营</p> <p>截至昨日下午 4 时,已有 1000 余辆出租汽车恢复营运</p> | <p>On the subject of the partial city centre taxi outage matter</p> <p>Municipal government spokesman responds to journalists questions</p> <p>就重庆主城区部分出租汽车停运一事</p> <p>市政府新闻发言人答记者问</p> |
| Nov 5 th 2008 | <p>More than 80% of taxis in the city centre have recovered normal operations</p> <p>主城区80%以上的出租汽车恢复营运</p> | <p>Municipal government news spokesman</p> <p>Answers further questions about our city's partial city-centre taxi outage matter</p> <p>就我市主城区部分出租汽车停运一事再答记者问</p> <p>市政府新闻发言人</p> |
| Nov 6 th 2008 | <p>City centre taxis completely returned to normal operation at 8am yesterday</p> <p>Municipal government says an alliance of relevant departments will protect the normal operation of taxis</p> <p>主城出租车昨晨 8 时全面恢复正常营运</p> <p>市政府表示将联合有关部门维护好出租车的正常营运</p> | n/a |

| | | |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Nov 7 th | <p>Ardently enquire about suffering, carefully listen to the people's voice</p> <p>A record of the discussion between Bo Xilai and other municipal leaders and taxi driver representatives</p> <p>殷殷问疾苦 细细听民声</p> <p>——薄熙来等市领导与出租车司机和市民代表座谈纪实</p> | <p>Administration's cornerstone principles for serving the people: enlightened, open, tolerant and responsible</p> <p>执政为民的基石:开明、开放、从容、负责</p> |
|---------------------|---|---|

TABLE 2: CHONGQING DAILY TAXI STRIKE HEADLINES, NOV 4TH-7TH, 2008

Not one of the front page headlines references the actual strike over the four days of reporting on the issue. Between November 4th and November 6th, the headline consistently tracks a progressive “resumption of operations” (*huifu yingyun*) or a return to “normal operations” (*zhengchang jingying/zhengchang yingyun*). The first day emphasises the alacrity of government action (“Party Committee and Municipal Government Take Active Steps To Ensure Normal Taxi Operations”) with the authorities positioned as body capable of ‘guaranteeing’ or ‘ensuring’ such a normality. The strap line points directly to those 1,000-plus taxis claimed to have “returned to normal service”, even on the first day of the strike. The following day it is claimed that 80% of taxis had ‘resumed operations’ (*huifu yingyun*) while the third day (November 6th) declares ‘a complete resumption of normal operations’.

The inner page headlines on the first and second day of the strike do reference the event, but in virtually identical terms. The *tifa* is identical: the strike is an ‘outage matter’ (*jiu...tingyun yishi*) and ‘partial’¹³⁰ (*bufen*) in its nature.

The headlines on November 7th are concerned entirely with the activities and comments of Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai and make no direct reference to the strike at all.

¹³⁰ ‘Partial’ in the sense that the word *bufen* indicates the outage only applied to a portion of the total number of taxis. The word *bufen* can be modified to make clear what *kind* of portion is being discussed – a large, or small, portion, for example, but is not here, creating ambiguity.

| | Front Page | Inside Pages |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Nov 4 th 2008 | <p>Portion of city centre taxis blocked from operating yesterday</p> <p>Party Committee and Municipal Government Take Active Steps To Ensure Normal Taxi Service Resumes</p> <p>主城部分出租车昨日营运受阻 <small>市委市政府采取措施确保出租车正常经营,今起全面恢复主城区出租车营运</small></p> | <p>Party Committee and Municipal Government Take Active Steps To Ensure Normal Taxi Service Resumes</p> <p>More than 1,000 taxis have returned to normal service by 4pm yesterday</p> <p>截至昨日下午4时,已有1000余辆出租汽车恢复营运 市委市政府采取积极措施确保出租汽车正常经营</p> <p>Municipal government spokesman responds to journalists questions On the subject of the partial city centre taxi outage</p> <p>City centre taxi operations completely return to normal today</p> <p>就重庆主城区部分出租汽车停运一事,市政府新闻发言人答记者问 今起全面恢复主城出租车正常营运</p> |
| Nov 5 th 2008 | <p>More than 80% of taxis in the city centre have recovered normal operations</p> <p>Daily supply of CNG natural gas to increase by 100,000 cubic metres daily to alleviate refuelling difficulties; government to implement pricing management of drivers' 'fees'</p> <p>主城80%以上的士恢复营运 每天新增10万立方米天然气,缓解加气难;政府将对出租汽车“份儿钱”实行价格管理</p> <p>11版</p> | <p>More than 80% of taxis in the city centre have recovered normal operations</p> <p>Municipal public security bureau and transport department will continue to strike against criminals and illegal operations to protect legitimate operators</p> <p>主城 80%以上出租车恢复营运 市公安、交通等部门将继续打击不法分子和非法营运,保护合法出租车</p> |
| Nov 6 th | <p>Taxis completely return to normal</p> <p>Municipal government apologises to</p> | <p>Taxis completely return to normal</p> <p>Municipal government apologises to</p> |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| 2008 | <p>citizens for inconvenience; portion of criminal elements arrested</p> <p>主城出租车全面恢复营运</p> <p>市政府对因此给市民带来的不便致歉; 部分不法分子被抓</p> <p>17版</p> | <p>citizens; taxi ‘banban qian’ will be lowered</p> <p>出租车全面恢复营运</p> <p>市政府向市民致歉; 出租车“板板钱”将降低</p> <p>No current plans to raise taxi prices</p> <p>—— 相关新闻 ——</p> <p>出租车目前无提价打算</p> |
| Nov 7 th 2008 | <p>Bo Xilai chats with taxi brothers and sisters</p> <p>Dialogue between government and people highlights people-centredness and administration’s new thinking</p> <p>薄熙来对话的哥的姐</p> <p>问政于民凸现以人为本执政新思维</p> | <p>Bo Xilai chats with taxi brothers and sisters, citizens approve of government’s frankness and pragmatism</p> <p>Meeting lasts for two and a half hours, Bo Xilai demonstrates consideration for the interests of the majority</p> <p>薄熙来对话的哥的姐</p> <p>市民赞政府坦诚务实</p> <p>座谈会持续两个半小时, 薄熙来表示兼顾多数人利益</p> |
| | | <p>Huang Qifan answers taxi brother’s questions, diliegently co-ordinates mulitple interests</p> <p>黄奇帆答的哥问</p> <p>认真协调多方利益</p> |
| | | <p>Record of Bo Xilai’s Dialogue With Taxi Brothers and Sisters</p> <p>薄熙来对话的哥的姐现场实录</p> <p>Dialogue between government and people highlights administration’s new thinking</p> <p>问政于民, 凸现执政新思维</p> |

TABLE 3: CHONGQING MORNING POST TAXI STRIKE HEADLINES, NOV 4TH–7TH, 2008

The *Chongqing Morning Post* does directly reference the strike itself in its first headline on November 4th – “Portion of city centre taxis blocked from operating yesterday” – though the word ‘blocked’ (*shouzu*), discussed above, offers no clue as to whether this is an internal or external obstruction and thus avoids the need to reference the actual strikers. The strap line predicts a ‘full-resumption of operations’, a claim repeated in one of the two headlines on the strike on page three. The *Chongqing Morning Post* is alone in emphasising these predictions in its headlines. The page three headline – “City centre taxi operations to completely return to normal from today” – appears below a kicker¹³¹ which implies the claim has been made by a government official – “Municipal government spokesman responds to journalists’ questions on the subject of the partial city centre taxi outage”¹³². This kicker is used as the main headline in both of the other two newspapers, suggesting the presence of specific propaganda instruction to maintain that particular formulation. Though the formulation was maintained, the *Chongqing Morning Post* editors’ decided to usurp it with a secondary headline that predicts an end to the strike, a prediction which turned out to be false; the strike did not end on November 4th, as highlighted in the newspaper’s two subsequent front page headlines. On November 5th, the headline confirms that “more than 80% of taxis had resumed operations”, and, on November 6th, it points to a “complete resumption of operations”. From November 7th, the headlines focus exclusively on the work of the government and various policy initiatives in response to the issues raised by the strike.

The headlines otherwise reflect the language of the *Chongqing Daily* newspaper, with an emphasis on government action and multiple references on inside pages to the “resumption of operations” (*huifu yingyun*) and a return to “normal operations” (*zhengchang yingyun*).

¹³¹ A kicker is a journalistic term referring to the first line, or paragraph, of an article, often printed in a larger typeface than the main body of the text.

¹³² The story itself actually reports the government spokesperson citing the city centre taxi companies’ promise to ‘return to normal operations’ that same day.

Chongqing Evening Post

| | Front Page | Inside Pages |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Nov 4 th 2008 | <p>Three measures to solve the partial taxi outage problem</p> <p>[Increase natural gas by 100,000 cubic metres daily] [Implement price management of drivers' fees] [Crackdown on criminals and illegal operators]</p> <p>三措施解决部分的士停运问题</p> <p><small>[每天新增10万立方米天然气] [对“份儿钱”实行价格管理] [严打不法分子和非法营运]</small></p> | <p>Portion of city centre taxi prevented from normal operations yesterday</p> <p>Party Committee and Municipal Government Take Active Steps To Ensure Normal Taxi Service Resumes, More than 1,000 taxis have returned to normal service by 4pm yesterday</p> <hr/> <p>主城部分出租车昨营运受阻</p> <p><small>市委市政府采取积极措施确保出租车正常经营,至昨下午4时已有千余辆出租车恢复营运</small></p> <hr/> <p>On the subject of the partial city centre taxi outage</p> <p>Municipal government spokesman responds to journalists questions</p> <p>就主城区部分出租汽车停运一事 市政府新闻发言人答记者问</p> |
| Nov 5 th 2008 | <p>More than 80% of taxis in the city centre have resumed normal operations</p> <p>Municipal government spokesman: drivers' fees will return to last year's level</p> <p>主城逾八成出租车恢复营运</p> <p><small>市政府新闻发言人:出租车“份儿钱”要降回去年水平</small></p> | <p>More than 80% of taxis in the city centre have resumed normal operations</p> <hr/> <p>主城80%以上出租车恢复营运</p> <hr/> <p>Municipal government spokesman answers further journalists questions about partial city centre taxi outage</p> <p>Taxi 'fees' will be lowered to last year's level</p> <hr/> <p>市政府新闻发言人就主城区部分出租车停运再答记者问 出租车“份儿钱”要降回去年水平</p> |
| Nov 6 th 2008 | <p>Complete resumption of normal operations</p> <p>Municipal government apologises to citizens, responsible transport committee to conduct investigation</p> | <p>City centre taxis completely returned to normal operation</p> <p>Municipal government apologizes to citizens on the matters of the taxi outage and enjoins the municipal transport</p> |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| | <p>主城区的士全面恢复正常营运 市政府向市民道歉,责成市交委作检查</p> | <p>committee to carry out a root and branch investigation</p> <p>主城区出租车全面恢复正常营运 市政府就出租车停运一事向市民道歉,责成市交委作深刻检查</p> <p>昨日,市政府召开新闻发布会,市政府副秘书长王毅就出租车停运一事进行情况说明。王毅表示,出租车停运给广大市民出行带来诸多不便,表示了对市民的歉意。他指出,市交委将立即启动应急预案,督促出租车企业尽快恢复运营,确保市民出行顺畅。同时,市交委也将对出租车行业进行整顿,规范市场秩序,保障市民权益。</p> <p>Municipal government vice secretary general answers journalists' questions in relation to taxi outage event</p> <p>Insufficient attention on taxi industry.</p> <p>Urge lowering of drivers' fees</p> <p>督促出租车行业认识不够 市政府副秘书长就出租车停运一事答记者问</p> <p>Four seats of measures to prevent similar thing occurring again</p> <p>Municipal government says an alliance of relevant departments will protect the normal operation of taxis</p> <p>四个配套举措防止类似事情发生</p> |
|--|---|---|

TABLE 4: CHONGQING EVENING POST TAXI STRIKE HEADLINES, NOV 4TH-7TH, 2008

The group's other commercial outlet, the *Chongqing Evening Post*, is notable for its more visually varied page design¹³³, and published headlines on the strike in four different colours, as shown above.

¹³³ The newspaper uses varied colours and typefaces, and routinely manipulates images – with crops and image blends – even on the front page.

Of the three newspapers, the Nov 4th headline is the most direct in referring to the strike, though this is a question of degrees: “Three steps to solve the problem of the partial taxi outage”. The strike is still ‘partial’ and the action of government is still the subject of the sentence¹³⁴. However, in contrast to the other two newspapers, the front-page headline explicitly recognises the strike, calling it an ‘outage’ (*ting yun*, literally, ‘a cessation of travel’), although collocates the noun with the word ‘problem’¹³⁵ relegating its significance to that of a puzzle to be faced, rather than a fight to be faced down (as the word ‘strike’ (*bayun*) – used in non-Chongqing media – clearly implies).

The fact that the inside headline is identical to the front page headline of the *Chongqing Morning Post* strongly suggests there were also local propaganda instructions around this specific formulation too.

As with the other two newspapers, from November 7th, the headlines are more varied and less constrained by specific formulations, but uniformly focus on Party Secretary Bo Xilai and various policy initiatives.

Images

Images were not used in any of the Chongqing publications whilst the strike was still in process on November 4th and 5th. Restrictions were evidently lifted on November 6th when both commercial newspapers printed prominent images of ranks of yellow taxis back at work. The *Chongqing Morning Post* used an image of two parallel ranks of taxis queued on the road in opposite directions on an otherwise empty main thoroughfare beside the Traders World Hotel in central Chongqing (below). The image is likely intended to be evidence that taxi operations had been returned to normal but it has a certain ambiguity. The lack of obvious activity and other vehicles on the road does not suggest a busy scene. Indeed, given the *modus operandi* of drivers during the strike was to park their vehicles on the roadside, the image could just as easily depict a strike. Indeed, other images seen of taxi strikes around China depict just such scenes. As a footnote, the only taxi that is obviously moving appears

¹³⁴ The strapline lists the three measures: “Increase to natural gas supply of 100,000 cubic metres per day, carry out price management of ‘fees’, strike hard on lawbreakers and illegal operators”.

¹³⁵ The Chinese word *wenti* (问题) may be translated as ‘problem’, or, less pejoratively, as ‘issue’ or ‘matter’.

to be turning against the direction of the queue which again undermines the sense that this is a scene of dynamism and activity.



IMAGE 3: CHONGQING MORNING POST, PAGE 17, NOVEMBER 6TH, 2008

The *Chongqing Daily* printed its first taxi image since the start of the strike on November 7th with an almost identical shot of the same small section of street (below), likely shot from the same elevated vantage point. The image is comparatively dynamic and has slightly less room for ambiguity. The taxis are ranked in a less uniform fashion, there is a public bus in the foreground, the image is tilted and the black and white rendering makes the mass of ranked yellow taxis less striking.



IMAGE 4: CHONGQING DAILY, PAGE 2, NOVEMBER 7TH, 2008

The *Chongqing Evening Post*'s image on November 6th is clearer in its depiction of activity. A passenger, smiling, clutches a baby as she clambers into an obviously working taxi. The image caption indicates the picture was taken just a few yards away from where the other two images were captured, on the opposite side of a major roundabout.



IMAGE 5: CHONGQING EVENING POST, PAGE 2, NOVEMBER 6TH, 2008

Explaining the strike

Reporting on November 4th in all three newspapers is based on twin reports by the *Chongqing Daily*. The only notable change between the three is in the *Chongqing Morning News* which prints the four-point explanation for the strike in table format. Not a single word of text is changed, but the box typographically delineates the four reasons given for the strike and the corresponding four remedial government measures (see below). Such a change may be considered insignificant but it is notable that, as with the headline changes discussed above, the *Chongqing Morning Post* is fractionally more adventurous within the obvious propaganda constraints it is operating under.

Aside from contradictions in explaining the strike – discussed below – all initial reporting on the strike offers a clear and consistent explanation for driver grievances. The very first reports offer four distinct reasons which explain why drivers may feel dissatisfied; each of the four is addressed with a corresponding government action. Such a strategy has the effect of closing down debate, diminishing potential space for alternative arguments. The event is explicable and provides an opportunity to demonstrate responsiveness. There is, however, some interesting variation between the newspapers in the way these reasons are presented, and some differences in the way these evolve over the three or four days on which the strike is reported.

The main story – which appeared on the front page in the *Chongqing Daily* and formed the page lead stories in both commercial newspapers – directly references the strike only in the first and the last paragraphs. It begins with a brief synopsis of events:

Yesterday morning at 5.30am, a portion of Chongqing city's cab drivers could not operate normally due to an obstruction to their normal activities causing travel difficulties for city centre passengers who use taxis and generating extremely adverse effects. (Liu, 2007)

The introduction couches events in terms of an 'obstruction' to normality – the 'obstruction' of drivers, the 'inconvenience' to 'normal' routines of citizens. However, the second paragraph appears to legitimise the actions of the protestors by explaining what appear to be legitimate problems. The article offers up an explanation of what has happened in clearly delineated terms. There are four reasons cited which, it is claimed, have been ventured by drivers themselves: conflict within taxi companies over fees; overly low taxi tariffs; difficulties in finding fuel; and unlicensed cabs. The logic suggests a clear path for remedial action.

The second paragraph presents a semantic juggling act, thanks to the euphemistic use of the expression 'blockage' to describe the strike. The story explains that "the obstruction of normal operations has four main reasons". As discussed above, the term 'obstruction' implies passivity and its use here avoids the need to refer directly to those active participants who may have caused the block. The avoidance of this reference to strikers is glaring. However, in the sentences explaining the four ostensible reasons for the action, strikers themselves become the sentence subject. The second of these even reads: "Hopes that the unreasonable price structure of taxi tariffs and the low prices that drivers are able to charge while stuck in traffic will be adjusted." The omission of a sentence subject is grammatically possible in Chinese in a way it is not in English without using a passive construction. However, though unnamed, drivers are the ones doing the 'hoping', and are therefore presumably the people doing the 'blocking' early referred to.

The final three paragraphs of the November 4th story refer to remedial action and present the government as both aware and responsive. There is also an attempt to emphasise negotiation:

The government has launched an ongoing investigation of price adjustments and, after soliciting views from a wide range of opinion, will propose a plan to deal with the situation. (ibid)

The government's position as neutral arbiter is emphasised in the fifth paragraph which announces the beginning of an investigation into the share of benefits (*liyi*), or profit, between taxi enterprises and their drivers. The dispute is thus posited as a commercial dispute.

The second story takes the form of a Q&A between one or more unidentified journalists and news spokesman. A news conference was indeed held on November 4th and this story could be read as a transcript of this meeting. However, the fact all three newspapers use identical copy – in a way they do not in the reporting of later press conferences – strongly suggests a single copy was drafted by a single individual or editorial team and subsequently distributed to other outlets for reprinting under local propaganda department instruction, despite appearing in a format which makes a pretence at a live, interactive exchange.

After a one sentence introduction, in which the strike is referenced as an “abnormality...in the operating situation of city centre taxis”, the story is structured around four ostensible questions from one or more journalists and corresponding answers for the unnamed news spokesman. These match the basic structure of the front page article.

The first question-and-answer deals with what has happened and why; the second explores the reasons for driver grievance; the third question solicits the ‘attitude to taxi companies’ and the answer declares ‘resolute support’ among taxi companies for government action; and the fourth asks what will happen if the strike persists,

providing an opportunity for the government spokesman to issue a threat to continuing action among drivers¹³⁶.

There is a clear tension between the reasons given for the strike in the first two answers. The government spokesman's first answer clearly portrays the incident not as a co-ordinated mass action but rather as a violent intimidation of drivers which has seen a small number of vehicles "smashed" (*bei da za*). Because of fears for their safety, drivers had "no choice but to suspend their service". This initial exchange ends with the government issuing an apology to commuters for the inconvenience caused.

The second paragraph, however, presents an obvious contradiction by enumerating four cited reasons for the taxi strike, reflecting the reasons already given in the front page story. Where the first answer appeared to place blame for the event on intimidation, the second elucidates four distinct reasons why drivers may be dissatisfied. This contradiction is present throughout the first two days of reporting by all three newspapers in Chongqing. There appears a wish, or more likely a propaganda need, to initially present the strike as the result of intimidation and violence – implying that the majority are not involved – but there is a subsequent attempt to offer explanations for strike action. No attempt is made to resolve or disguise this contradiction, though it is notable the extent to which the *Chongqing Daily's* front page story does not employ the language of the news spokesman in blaming the 'outage' on violence and intimidation.

This changes on November 5th when the ostensibly contradictory paragraphs are included in all three newspaper's page-lead reports on the strike. The following two paragraphs were used in all three newspapers:

At 5.30am two days ago, a portion of Chongqing city's cab drivers were obstructed from operating normally. A small number of cars were attacked. Because drivers were worried about their safety and that of their cars could be not guaranteed, they had no choice but to adopt measures

¹³⁶ The news spokesman is quoted as saying: "There will be a serious and legal strike against the illegal behaviour which prevents the normal operation of taxis so as to protect the legitimate interests of taxi operators and to guarantee social stability and harmony".

to suspend services, causing difficulties for city centre passengers in finding a taxi.

It is understood that difficulties in refuelling with natural gas, illegal cabs and several other factors were among the causes of the event (shi qing) but the main reason is the daily increase of between 50 and 70 RMB in the 'fee' (fen'er qian) that taxi companies collect from their drivers. This has caused the drivers' yearly income to be reduced by more than 20,000 RMB. Additionally, the monitoring and management by relevant government departments has been ineffective, thus causing a partial taxi service outage. (Chongqing Daily, 2008b)

What has a clear cause-and-effect in the introduction –drivers had no choice but to stop working because of worries about their safety and that of their cars – is complicated hugely in the second paragraph which essentially repeats the four-point list of legitimate driver grievances which had been initially proffered the previous day. Moreover, it also elevates the comparative importance of one factor – the issue of contractual fees paid by drivers to their companies – and positions this as one of egregious corporate greed, facilitated by the lack of proper government “monitoring and management”.

The *Chongqing Morning Post* and *Chongqing Evening Post* reprinted this report on November 5th with no substantial alterations¹³⁷.

The ending of the strike, sometime on November 5th, signals an obvious freeing of the strict propaganda constraints on the three newspapers, and greater variety is seen in the reasons for the strike. In its main story on November 6th, the *Chongqing Daily* printed the following paragraph:

According to investigations, the four main causes of this outage event are taxi companies' unauthorised increase to their management fees, the flag fares that drivers believe are relatively low, difficulties in refuelling and the illegal operation of 'black cabs'. (Liu, 2008b)

¹³⁷ The *Chongqing Morning Post* fused together two of the paragraphs, but this aside, the reports were identical.

In the following paragraph, the government response is restated. Four of the five cited actions are a direct response to three of the four cited reasons for the strike – only the issue of low flag fares is omitted and is not returned to again in the article – and a final action indicates the government will take a dim view of future strikes, implying one need only ‘obstruct operations’ to be regarded as a ‘criminal’:

[The government immediately corrected] the mistaken actions of taxi companies who have increased management fees without authorisation, doing everything to guarantee [smooth] transport during the outage period, increasing the daily supply of CNG natural gas by 100,000 cubic metres from the 4th onwards to solve ‘refuelling difficulties’, upping the intensity of the strike of ‘black cabs’, establishing 25 enforcement points in the city centre, and by striking at those criminals who obstruct normal operations. (ibid)

The *Chongqing Morning Post*’s story on November 6th is the first which has ostensibly been written by its own journalists. It reports the now-named government spokesman – Zhu Bo – giving the reasons for the strike as “the unauthorised and unapproved increase of fees by taxi companies, refuelling difficulties, and rampant illegal cabs.” The issue of low flag-fares, cited in the *Chongqing Daily* as a reason for the strike, is reported in a breakout story which does not position the issue as a cause of the strike. The article does, however, quote Chongqing’s Deputy Secretary General Cui Jian as saying there will be no immediate change to the fare structure.

The newspaper also lists the same five basic government responses, but switches the order of the first two and lumps the establishment of ‘25 enforcement points’ into the same category as the “strike” on criminals – stating these are both examples of “increased monitoring”. There is the use of the word “criminal” (*bufa fenzi*) but it is used to describe those who have attacked the taxis’ lights or light casings, rather than being – as was the case in the *Chongqing Daily* – anyone who obstructs operations. In this way, though it is clear that the senior *Chongqing Daily* sets the basic structure and *tifa* for reporting by junior, commercial publications, there is room for alterations to the vocabulary and logical reasoning.

In a similar vein, the *Chongqing Morning Post*, uses a virtually identical introduction to its senior stable mate – indicating clearly the articles came from a single source – but changes the last line to state that the event “created a *bad* social impact” (Yu & Lin, 2008a). The *Chongqing Daily* article, by contrast, explained that the event “created a *certain* social impact” [author’s italics] (Liu, 2008b). Such a change appears to be fairly insignificant in itself, but it is noticeable in the context of a paragraph that is otherwise *exactly* the same. It begs the question: if there are no stringent propaganda guidelines, why use almost exactly the same copy as another publication; if there are stringent guidelines, wouldn’t the editing of this single adjective be seen as subversive?

The same process can be seen in the reporting by the *Chongqing Evening Post*, which, if anything, ventures even farther from the senior publication’s position¹³⁸. Its introduction collates single lines from the *Chongqing Daily* copy but changes the tone by splicing them in a completely different order. The introduction reads as follows:

Yesterday the municipal government convened a news conference where Cui Jian, deputy secretary of the municipal government made an announcement about the taxi outage event, expressing profound apologies for the major inconvenience caused to a large number of citizens by the occurrence of the outage event. Cui Jian said that, because of long-term management neglect by the municipal transport committee, the primary body which manages taxis, responsibility would be unavoidably born. The party committee and municipal government enjoined the municipal transport department to conduct a root and branch investigation of the matter. (Chongqing Evening Post, 2008a)

This introduction takes the same basic starting scenario as its senior sister publication – the calling of a news conference attended by senior propaganda and party personnel – but completely reorients its focus away from comments about an ending of the strike, and towards the admission of culpability. The apology is not only

¹³⁸ It may be significant that this story has been removed from the newspaper’s online archive, despite the stories that surround it on the page all being present. There may be a straightforward explanation for this unrelated to any sensitivities around the report. However, it is odd that this is the only story in that day’s newspaper which is not available online. It was read by the author on the PDF copy of the page, which was still accessible via the newspaper’s website.

elevated to the introduction, it is also attributed to Cui Jian himself, and thus personalised. The *Chongqing Daily's* treatment, by contrast, makes clear the apology is being made by the municipal government as a whole, not an individual, and appears in the final paragraph of the story rather than the first.

The *Chongqing Evening Post* and the *Chongqing Morning Post* both print extensive quotes from the news conference lead by the now-named senior Chongqing officials, Zhu Bo and Cui Jian, though – for the first time – there is variation in how the answers are reported. The *Chongqing Morning Post* reports only the questions and answers which align with the main issues that have already been reported, and edited the responses in a way that appears to flatter the speakers. By contrast, the *Chongqing Evening Post* reported the words of both journalists and officials which combine to offer a more complete picture of how the strike came about, and paint a far less edited – thus less flattering – picture of two official's occasionally awkward or somewhat rambling answers.

Of particular note is that way in which the *Chongqing Morning Post* reports Cui Jian's comments as representing an assurance that prices will not rise. It reports him as saying:

Increasing prices affects citizens and researching prices is a very complex process, therefore there are no current plans for prices to increase. (Yu & Lin, 2008b)

The *Chongqing Evening Post* reported a very different quote from what was, in all likelihood, the same utterance, which not only put different words in the official's mouth, but also leads to a very difficult conclusion about the likelihood of price rises:

If I was to say today that prices will increase, it will cause a new problem for citizens. If we want to investigate prices, it requires a very complex research process, therefore I have not talked today about the issue of whether or not prices will rise. (Wang, 2008)

This could simply be a case of the two different journalists having differing shorthand skills, but it is noticeable that, by November 6th, differences have emerged in what, the day before, was uniform reporting of the press conferences.

November 7th saw a decisive change in reporting on the incident. All three newspapers carried special reports on the high-profile meeting between Bo Xilai and several municipal government leaders and taxi driver representatives, which was televised and broadcast live online. The meeting offered drivers the chance to speak for themselves in reporting their problems, and several new grievances were added, including a scarcity of toilet stops, as well as pick-up and put-down stops; chronic congestion; inconsistencies in social security and pension contributions between companies; problems around obtaining laundered seat covers; and the number of fines habitually incurred by drivers. However, no participant makes the explicit causal link by admitting to going on strike or explaining directly why they may have taken that course of action.

The new factors are only formally corralled into a narrative which represented potential 'reasons' for the strike by Bo Xilai's use of a slogan – "One Difficulty, Two Shortages, Three Surpluses" (*yi nan, er shao, san duo*). The 'one difficulty' is explained as the "difficulty in refuelling"; the 'two shortages' are the lack of stopping points and driver toilets, and the 'three surpluses' are the high number of illegal cabs, high fines, and high fees.

Bo is quoted as claiming he personally came up with the slogan having read the opinion of various online commentators who had identified "One Difficulty, One Low and Three Highs". Bo's referencing of online explanations – which obviously contained a far broader range of opinion than had been reported by the media – indicates a willingness to go beyond the narrow four-point explanation of the strike. However, Bo asserts control by eliminating the 'one low' – the issue of low fares – from his own personal variation on the slogan.

The *Chongqing Morning Post* printed a double page spread from its sister-website, CQNET (*hualong wang*), in which the entire two hour meeting is broken down into 25 distinct passages, each focused on a specific issue, and with lengthy quotations used from both Bo Xilai and driver representatives (CQNET, 2008). A lengthy report on the following page lists a number of immediate government initiatives which deal directly with many of the complaints cited during the meeting. Among these are rules to forbid the secret monitoring of taxis by traffic police, the establishment of 100 new

temporary stopping points , a stepping up of the crackdown on illegal taxis and a general "sunshine enforcement" and a "flexible enforcement" policy which uses "persuasion and education, rather than punishment, for minor offences."

The final page of coverage comprises three sections of opinion. The main page lead is an op-ed pieced together from two distinct Xinhua sources. This is the first time that local Chongqing media uses Xinhua copy, which has guided most national reporting on the issue. The version that appears in the *Chongqing Morning Post* is cut directly from Xinhua article, and appears word for word, aside from the addition of a Bo Xilai quote. This quote is drawn from a different Xinhua article but has been altered slightly. The first line reads "I believe it's no accident that the majority of taxi drivers have [this] opinion" (Xinhua, 2008i). In the original Xinhua article, the quote reads as follows: "I believe it's no accident this taxi outage has occurred." Secondly, *Chongqing Morning Post's* edit uses the generic term 'the government' in its advocacy of change, rather than making clear that Bo includes himself in the phrase (i.e. "The government needs to...", rather than, as it appears in the original Xinhua article, "We, the government, need to...") (ibid). Additionally, the *Chongqing Morning Post* adds its own subheads, one of which emphasises a line in the Xinhua copy which describes the government's role as being that of a 'referee', balancing competing interests.

The second and third stories on this page both feature praise for the meeting from local sources. The op-ed by the newspaper's own writer declares the meeting will "go down in history" for the "beautiful template [it provides] for a virtuous interaction between officials and the people" (Wang, 2008). The meeting represented "...a valiant effort....to gather up public opinions, concentrate popular wisdom, and ease the people's emotions". Finally, the sidebar column features three similarly glowing comments from Netizens, full of praise for the meeting, and its mediatisation, which "sets a precedent in China's public crisis response" (Du, 2008).

In summary, though the reporting on November 7th includes a huge amount of new information and new potential causes for the strike, reporters are extremely circumspect in placing these reasons in the context of the strike. Rather, discussion of problems was made in the context of an open and frank discussion between drivers and government leaders, with the propaganda purpose being to demonstrate a

willingness among leaders to listen and reflect. It is only Bo Xilai, in his coining of a slogan, who appears to take responsibility for corralling these various threads into an ‘explanation’ for the strike.

The *Chongqing Evening Post* prints two Xinhua articles on page seven, both of which are striking in the way they contradict previous reporting. Both articles begin with the same line – that “Chongqing citizens unexpectedly discovered that their taxis had disappeared without a trace” on the morning of November 3rd, which is strikingly different to the tone taken by reporting in the first two days, which emphasised repeatedly the limited, or ‘partial’ nature of the strike. The main story points to the speed and ostensible transparency of the government response, as well as the apology made, as being praiseworthy and representing something of a new crises-response strategy. The second, sidebar story, is entitled “Playback of the strike” and essentially rewrites history with detail that was lacking in the early reports by local newspapers. Where earlier reports were at pains to present a picture of a minor disturbance, this ‘rewind’ story makes clear there were 10,000 police or traffic police on the street during the strike, and that attempts were made to organise a strike-breaking fleet of taxis but they were ultimately unsuccessful (Xinhua, 2008h). The ‘open and transparent’ response praised in the main headline of the page is, by implication, not the reporting that was seen in Chongqing itself, but was rather that of Xinhua and other publications.

Non-Chongqing Reporting

Xinhua

Xinhua Chongqing Bureau’s initial dispatch of November 3rd was used, to varying extents, by the national newspapers the following day. It is interesting in its own right – and shall be discussed initially – though its treatment by the commercial press is also noteworthy.

Although the first quoted source of information in Xinhua’s November 3rd dispatch was Chongqing’s Public Security Bureau (PSB), the report emphasises eye-witness testimony, albeit testimony of journalists themselves, rather than the official data and quotes that are preferred by the more cautious reports of Chongqing newspapers.

Indeed, the vivid headline of the dispatch, “Witnessing the Chongqing Taxi Strike”, is in stark contrast to the very straight headlines in other publications.

Of semantic interest is the prominent use of the word “transport strike” (*bayun*), preferred to the more neutral and euphemistic terms, described in detail above, such as “outage” (*tingyun*) or “blockage” (*shouzu*).

The government response is initially de-emphasised. The writer uses sub-headings to divide the article into four distinct sections: after a brief introduction, there’s a section titled “Strike affects life for the masses”; the following section is titled “Taxi Driver Appeals”¹³⁹; while the final section deals with the official response, under the title, “Government vigorously implements measures to calm the storm”. This is a reversal of the priorities as ordered in local Chongqing media.

The menace of the striking drivers, and implied threat to public order, is made explicit at the end of the second section. While acknowledging the determination of some drivers to engage the government on specific issues, the writer explains that, “there were also drivers who did not dare go out on the street for fear that their vehicles may be attacked”. In the next paragraph, the reporter details an encounter with a large group of drivers who hurled water bottles at passing drivers and surrounded the cab of a female driver, suggesting strikers had engaged in physical intimidation.

However, the reporter cites unnamed “citizens” and “Netizens” in asserting that the public mood was ‘understanding’ (*lijie*), rather than ‘angry’. Threats have been identified but a distinction is clearly made with the reasonable appeals of some drivers. These two parallel themes are clarified over subsequent days as violence is de-emphasised and a more emollient attitude is displayed by the authorities.

It is also notable the extent to which the Xinhua copy is written from a first-person perspective and features the quoted voices of participating drivers. While quotes from ‘citizens’ during the protest period in the Xiamen PX incident were indistinguishable from government spokesmen, here there is apparently an attempt

¹³⁹ The original word *suqiu* may be translated as an ‘appeal’ or as a ‘demand’. In English, the latter obviously carries a somewhat more strident tone. There is an in-built ambiguity in the original Chinese.

to capture genuine opinion, or at least opinion which is expressed in a non-official vernacular.

Oriental Morning Post

The commercial newspapers focused on in this study used the Xinhua report as the basis for their coverage of the incident. However, the two commercial newspapers showed different degrees of latitude as to how the story was framed within their own publication, in terms of both positioning in and editorial choices in headlines, straplines and pull-quotes.

The *Oriental Morning Post's* (OMP) initial November 4th report on the strike, for example, was a page four lead story and carried the entire contents of the previous evening's Xinhua dispatch¹⁴⁰ word-for-word. However, the newspaper added its own headlines, sub-headlines, straplines, images and captions.

While the story led with the negative impact of the strike on commuters (1st paragraph) and emphasised the violence exhibited by a minority of strikers (4th paragraph), the headline is assiduously factual ("Widespread taxi strike takes place in Chongqing") while the strapline not only offers the reasons for the strike but also appears to blame the managing government departments which had not solved these underlying issues earlier:

Concerns over high petrol costs, low fares, frequent fines and other problems repeatedly made known to management department but appeals have not been resolved. (Xinhua, 2008a)

The OMP story is split into five sections: the same brief introduction, followed by a timeline of the development of the strike; the reasons for the strike; the reaction of citizens; and government measures. However, the newspaper inserted its own sub-headings and straplines. The first of these draws attention to the damage being caused to vehicles which broke the strike. However, the following three all present frame strikers positively, pointing to the fact that problems have existed for a long

¹⁴⁰ The Xinhua story, retrieved from news.xinhuanet.com, was time-stamped 10.02pm on November 3rd

period of time and highlighting quotes which call two of the driver appeals ‘reasonable’ and the existence of ‘understanding’ amongst the public.

The last section of the Xinhua report, which hones in on the government response, is separated out from the main lead story and given its own headline in a separate box, appearing to draw a clear typographical distinction between the course of events themselves, and the official response, a distinction that did not exist in the original report and was not present in the local reporting in Chongqing.

A separate Xinhua story is also printed, ostensibly around the news conference which formed the basis of the secondary stories in the Chongqing press during the first two days of the strike (see above). The headline makes clear that the taxis that had already returned to operation were “organized” to do so – “More than 1,000 taxis organized to resume normal service” – which stands in stark contrast to Chongqing press reports, which did not make this distinction and, in fact, left the impression that the taxis had returned of their own accord.

The copy itself is curt:

Responding to the taxi strike event, the relevant government bodies said they would step up mediation between taxi companies and drivers over the distribution of benefits, and increase the supply of natural gas used to fuel taxis, strike hard at illegal cab drivers and ensure that normal order is returned to order and that social stability is secured. (Xinhua, 2008b)

This news came from the Chongqing Municipal Transport Committee press conference that was called on the afternoon of November 3rd.

On the morning of November 3rd, a taxi strike event occurred in central Chongqing. For the convenience of citizens, the relevant Chongqing municipal departments organised more than 1,000 taxis to resume operation on two successive occasions. (ibid)

A Xinhua report, published in the *Chongqing Evening Post* three days later, indicated that these attempts were largely unsuccessful and it was these drivers, organized by the municipal transport department, who were primarily victims of the intimidation and violence by strikers.

The image which accompanies this story shows drivers lounging beside their vehicles, and carries the caption: “A number of drivers have said that they would like to get out and earn money but that they would not go back onto the road until their requests have met with a response”

The newspaper’s news report on the strike on November 5th takes a more conservative approach in its headline, declaring, much as the Chongqing newspapers had, that “80% of Taxis in Central Chongqing Return To Operation”. This claim is drawn from a Chongqing government spokesman and is undermined in the copy itself, with a succession of comparisons between what is claimed and what was witnessed by on-the-spot reporters:

Liang Peijun, deputy director of Chongqing’s transport committee, said that half of the city’s taxi fleet had returned to work by 2pm on November 4th. There are 34 taxi companies which are operating more than 100 taxis and – in total – nearly 8,000 vehicles of one kind or another.

But your correspondent saw in the street that most of the taxis on the road had not lit the dome light because of fears among some drivers that their cars may be attacked or surrounded. Reporters also learned that a number of the taxis were carrying staff from the taxi companies or family and friends. (Xinhua, 2008c)

The picture caption also makes clear that the ‘resumption’ of services was, at best, partial: “Yesterday, under the organisation of a number of relevant municipal government departments, a portion of taxis returned to the street to resume operation”.

The story accentuates driver fears of violence in explaining the absence of taxis. The second paragraph begins with this line:

In order to protect the safety of taxi drivers, Chongqing’s transport administration department and police officers deployed a large number of officers onto the streets , but most taxi drivers still refused to go onto the streets because of safety concerns and threats. (ibid)

A second story quotes a specific Chongqing official in explaining that the petrol station shortages were due to a recent “temperature drop”, and a tendency for drivers to refuel at the same time – information that is entirely absent from local reporting. Moreover, a third editorial places the incident in context of “mass incidents”:

In recent years, channels where the masses can express their demands have not been clear in some areas and there have been times where the interests of the masses have been damaged, giving rise to mass incidents, which not only seriously damages the image of the party and government, but also affects social stability and social harmony. Before the taxi strike in Chongqing, drivers raised problems with the relevant departments on many occasions but these did not generate sufficient attention among these relevant departments, causing tensions to mount, grievances to pile up, and eventually fermenting the large-scale strike event. (Xinhua, 2008d)

On the same day, the newspaper published a long editorial on the incident, entitled “Judging from the ‘taxi strike’ event, ‘what should be done’ after information is disclosed?” This took as its main subject the subject of “mastering the power of public opinion guidance” in a society where there is inevitably increasing social ferment:

These give the impression that social problems are becoming more and more acute. In fact, to a society which is transforming itself, these problems have long existed. However, their exposure today is the result of prolonged foment. That they can now be “intensively” displayed in the public eye reflects the government’s wisdom and courage in facing complex social problems. (Zhang, 2008)

The op-ed argues that given the inevitability of conflicts of interest, learning how to manage information is critical. It is conceded that “in the past, in large part” the government would tend to “block” or...delay information about sudden events”.

That [problems] can now be “intensively” displayed in the public eye reflects the government’s wisdom and courage in facing complex social problems. (ibid)

A little later, Chongqing's "methodical and measured handling" of the event is praised, though within the context of one of the ideological lynchpin's of the Hu-Wen government, that of the 'harmonious society'.

There is no doubt that the method employed by Chongqing to deal with this taxi strike is one of the means of building a harmonious society. So, from the handling of this incident, what useful inspiration should we take? (ibid)

The *Oriental Morning Post*'s news coverage on November 6th once again uses Xinhua copy. The story once again quotes Zhu Bo, the Chongqing propaganda official, as blaming the outage on drivers' fears for their safety, and asserted that punishment that would be administered to as-yet unnamed officials.

As the department responsible for taxis, the Chongqing transport committee has long neglected its management duties and cannot shirk its responsibility. The municipal government has instructed the municipal transport committee to conduct an in-depth investigation... (Xinhua, 2008e)

In both senses, the story is not hugely different to that which was appearing in Chongqing on the same day, though there is an emphasis on the punishment of local officials which was absent from local reporting. The strapline of the story leads with the fact that the "responsible people will be dealt with severely" – ambiguous in itself, though the story makes no mention of violence and several mentions of negligent officials – including the quote above – leading to the obvious conclusion that 'responsible people' refers not to errant drivers but rather officials.

In stark contrast to its editorial the previous day, a combative op-ed is printed in the *Oriental Morning Post* on November 6th which accentuates the severity of the strike – describing it alternatively as a "city-wide taxi strike that has defied wind and rain"; a "full city" strike; and a "worse-case scenario" – and mocks the self-congratulation which is perceived amid the reporting and editorialising on the strike:

The situation up to now can be described as 'satisfactory' and all parties can breathe a sigh of relief. But what this 'breath' will amount to in the

end is not easy to say. I have a lurking feeling that a fishbone remains stuck in the throat and will continue to tickle the airways. (Yang, 2008)

This impediment is claimed to be a lack of channels for meaningful communication between protestors and government, and a failure to resolve fundamental problems. Rather than praise the response in Chongqing, as the previous day's editorial did, the writer emphasises the local government's tendency to blame strikers and argues its response is mere 'nit-picking':

...it is not difficult to see that the relevant government departments will continue to lay the largest share of the blame on the strikers, rather than looking at the illegal increases in driver fees levied by the taxi companies. While an inconvenience to the general public of course requires an apology from the government, don't those drivers who have felt the additional burden of increased driver fees also deserve a sincere apology? After all, regardless of the exact causes of a strike movement, a strike demonstrates that a government's supervision has been ineffective and the service it has provided inefficient. (ibid)

The *Oriental Morning Post* published another Xinhua news article on November 7th which covered the Bo Xilai public meeting. It is notable for the manner in which Bo Xilai's slogan, "one difficulty, two shortages and three surpluses" is used to offer explanations for the strike, without – as it is in Chongqing itself – being attributed to Bo himself. The strapline reads: "Xinhua issues commentary arguing that a "new way of thinking" should be used in facing public events", though the article doesn't once mention this fact, suggesting that there may have been a propaganda instruction to reference the Xinhua editorial (Xinhua, 2008f).

A final article on November 9th reports that "Chongqing taxi operators have publicly committed to lowering driver fees" and that all the city's companies signed a public letter committing themselves to this goal, "provided the government issued specific policies to bring down fees". This report, based on Xinhua copy, did not feature in the local media in Chongqing (Xinhua, 2008g).

The Southern Metropolis Daily

The *Southern Metropolis Daily* (SMD) also used an abridged version of the same November 4th Xinhua story used by the *Oriental Morning Post* (OMP) but without such typographical additions and editing the story in such a way that emphasised the taxi driver's reasons and government measures, lending the story a more factual tone than its Shanghai counterpart. It did, however, employ the lexical term 'strike' (*bayun*) in an otherwise extremely matter-of-fact headline ("Widespread taxi strike takes place in Chongqing").

Its report on November 5th was much briefer than that which appeared in the *Oriental Morning Post* and omitted the eye-witness passages which appeared to contradict the official statements of Chongqing officials. The article flags its provenance in the first sentence – "Journalists learned from Chongqing's municipal transport committee that, by 2pm on November 4th, half of the city's urban taxi fleet had returned to work" (Xinhua, 2008j) – and the remainder of the article is very similar to that which appeared in the Chongqing press, emphasising the government response, laying the blame for driver malcontent on an increase in the fees levied by companies. However, unlike, the articles which appeared in the Chongqing press, the SMD story does not repeat the admission by the Chongqing government spokesman that a failure of administrative oversight allowed this increase to take place. With these factors taken together, it's possible to argue the SMD article is the most neutral of all articles in this study. This is a surprising finding for a newspaper that is routinely labelled as being the most adversarial in China. Given the reporting by the same newspaper on November 6th, it is possible this was a deliberate editorial strategy to decrease scrutiny on the newspaper and thus decrease the possibility of pre-emptive censorship ahead of an expected investigative article the following day.

On November 6th, however, under the headline "The Chongqing Outage - the background chain of exploitation", the SMD ran a 5,700-character investigative expose of "a multi-layered chain of exploitation [that] has formed within Chongqing's blighted taxi industry" (Long, 2008 – See Appendix B).

The article appears to be the result of two-day's worth of reporting on the ground in Chongqing, indicating the SMD dispatched a journalist to the city on the day the strike

first broke. In contrast to Xinhua's relatively factual eye-witness reports, the writing carries a pessimistic, almost noir-ish tone: "The feeling of conflict spreads like a germ throughout the city"; "This kind of pessimistic mood of frustration is rendered on the faces of drivers in the wake of the strike. [Driver Jiang] is worried about the future"; "...there is an acute sense of awareness among drivers that the strike...has become increasingly acrimonious"; and ends with the line, "Rain soaks the streets and occasionally taxis without their lights on abruptly swung in off the main road". There are later references to "institutional decay", a "rotting" industry, and claims "the government stands accused of collusion with the illegal car rental companies" (ibid). Finally, violence is introduced as a theme in terms of the main image, which carries a photograph, "provided by a Netizen", of an ostensible mob attack on an illegal cab driver.

The first half of the story is written as eye-witness testimony as the reporter rides with a driver who has had his vehicle smashed, though a single line implies that much of it was written on November 4th, "the day after the strike began", which suggests a story may have been written and prepared for the November 5th edition but never published. This part of the story suggests that evidence seen by the reporter "implies that the transport strike wave is continuing" despite official pronouncements, and quotes the driver as saying, "[the incident has] stirred the government, but the fundamental problems have not been solved" (ibid).

Elsewhere in the article, the journalist examines in detail the economic interests involved in the fee structures, explaining that even drivers are capable of being both victims and perpetrators in an "exploitative fee chain". This economic perspective is unlike anything that was published in Shanghai or Chongqing and points to a fundamental structural problem that requires a structural solution.

The article also points to the roots of the strike, revealing there was a near-strike in July 2008 that was averted because of the local government's hyper-sensitivity to the upcoming Beijing Olympic Games. There are lengthy quotes from an industry campaigner, Yang Xiaoming, who had tried to operate outside the system but had been thwarted by what he calls a "monopoly". In the later section, the article includes the official Chongqing government response to the strike but then positions Yang's

criticisms of the response. "The government putting the blame [for the strike] on 'fees' only scratches the surface, and does not touch on the core issues of the taxi industry."

Finally, the article points to Xinhua's "rare rolling coverage of the incident" and makes the assertion that, "Transparency of information avoided further deterioration of the event" (ibid). But even here the compliment is offered negatively. Rather than being a refreshing and encouraging sign of transparency that improved the situation and brought about resolution – the dominant tone of other articles – Xinhua's proactive reporting stance is taken to be a tactic that stopped things getting even worse. Moreover, the article ignores the fact that local media did not use Xinhua-sourced reportage at all.

An editorial, printed in the newspaper on the same day, takes a more measured approach, claiming that "the Chongqing municipal government emerges with some credit" and comparing its approach of relative openness to "the past response of many other local governments" which was "to conceal, evade, scold and suppress" (Chang, 2008). However, the article also points out that the four responses announced by the local government "did not touch on the most fundamental problem: the monopoly system of taxi management" (ibid). Moreover, the author – an unnamed 'senior media person' – criticises the local government for initially trying to blame the strike on a small number of troublemakers.

Initially the government said that "a small number of people were manipulating the event" on the grounds that "most taxis had begun operating normally that morning but then met with a small number of people who attacked cars or forced passengers out of vehicles." Merely focusing on a small number of people smashing up cars was clearly not consistent with the fact that 8,000 taxis had stopped operations. Moreover, if the government departments had understood the real reasons behind the strike, they should have realised that the event was not down to the manipulations of a minority of people, but was rather because of the dissatisfaction of the majority of people....Maintaining that the strike was the work of "a small number of troublemakers" was the

government's biggest regret in its emergency response that day and reflects the fact that some relevant departments still hold on to ridiculous old ideas.(ibid)

The author claimed that the government retreated from this position on November 4th. However, this study has shown that local media were still maintaining the notion that the strike was down to fear and intimidation by a minority on November 5th and beyond.

The SMD's final article on the incident was an edited version of a Xinhua report on Bo Xilai's televised meeting with driver representatives, printed on November 7th. It actually strips out quotes from drivers and includes only direct comment from Bo Xilai himself. As such, it is a return to the highly cautious style of reporting seen on November 4th and 5th.

The People's Daily

The news story carried by the People's Net, the People's Daily news website, on November 4th is nearly identical in tone and content to the reporting in the *Chongqing Daily* and, indeed, is drawn from reporting by People's Net's Chongqing office. This is to emphasise the ostensible threat to stability and to highlight the government response to nullify such a threat. The headline's subject is the 'statement' issued by local authorities to deal with the taxi 'suspension'. The strapline offers reassurance that more than 1,000 taxis had resumed 'normal service', with the assertion made in the second paragraph that 'a number of others' had not gone back to work 'because of worries over their safety'. The report leads on the inconvenience caused to passengers and the swift government response. While there is acknowledgement of driver concerns, the issues are presented as a specific checklist of problems which are identifiable and, therefore, by implication, eminently solvable. This four-point checklist, explaining the reasons for the strike, is common to all initial reports. In the People's Daily report of November 4th, on the four 'main issues' raised by drivers, the government is said to have responded with 'measures' (Yu & Hou, 2008).

By November 7th there is greater variety displayed. An online opinion piece carried on the People's Daily Net website on November 7th references the event as a 'strike' (*ba gong*) and suggests that the event is a test for Chongqing's city leaders. The author argues that "the critical issue" is not the taxis or the drivers, but "how city managers are going to find a balance between the interests and demands of all the parties related to this notable event." The author praises the Chongqing administration for its 'opening gambit': "...they have given a profound apology to the general public – having the courage to directly face the issues and not evading responsibility or prevaricating with empty words, or wasting precious energy on blocking communications or 'hushing up' the news. Moreover, they allowed authoritative media to report events immediately; this aspect of the government response which is most worthy of commendation" (Jiang, 2008). However, the author suggests the Chongqing government needs to follow this up with real action:

...old habits of issuing directives are not only ineffective but also do not accord with policies of a country ruled by law. Thinking about how city managers can face this change without panicking; how they can get past superficial appearances in emergency situations and crack difficult problems; how they can do their best to avoid those simplistic conclusions where a 'minority of troublemakers' are blamed... Action is more important than just admitting that a problem exists (ibid).

The subtext of the comment is that the much-reported news conference of the previous day could be interpreted as 'superficial' and intended to 'generate the greatest popularity'. What is praised is the decision to allow authoritative media to report events immediately – and notably not the rather ostentatious live televised 'driver discussion'. When it is remembered that the impetus for this open reporting came from outside Chongqing, as Chongqing's official media, while acknowledging the strike, did engage in fairly traditional prevarication and blaming the situation on 'a minority of troublemakers', this ostensible praise may be interpreted as concealed criticism.

The article concludes that meeting the above conditions would constitute "the real meaning behind the idea of a people-centred scientific concept of development" – an

ideological theme which may be said to be the guiding policy of the entire Hu Jintao-era (Barme, 2012). The article points to potential anxiety about the way Chongqing authorities had handled the propaganda surrounding the strike.

Summary and Conclusions

This account draws attention to the extent of reporting and the diversity of reporting that existed in mainland press reporting of the 2008 Chongqing taxi strike. This event attracted more coverage, and more diversity within the coverage, than any other in this study.

The most obvious conclusion is the schism between Chongqing publications, whose reporting was largely dictated by the most senior Party-affiliated newspaper, and those outside the city, whose reporting was largely dictated by copy from the Xinhua News Agency. Publications within the city were obviously responding to restrictions, though these are not absolutely stringent, while those outside appeared to operate fractionally more freely, all the while responding to the parameters imposed by Xinhua. On November 6th, the day after the strike finally ended, it becomes clear that the reporting restrictions are loosened, both at a national level, and within the Chongqing press.

The reports analysed here are clearly not completely co-ordinated and there are times where contradiction creeps in. There is also a surprising amount of condemnation of Chongqing authorities. This is not carried out by Xinhua itself, but Xinhua's obvious attempt to impose a veneer of transparency and openness is the cover which publications such as the SMD and OMP use to deliver excoriating criticisms of distant political leaders.

To turn first to the local Chongqing press, there is a clear strategy at work within the reporting. Clear, enumerated explanations are given for the strike, each of which have corresponding policy responses; the threat to stability is emphasised and a minority of drivers are blamed for the strike; officials are not named; the Party publication sets the tone for commercial offshoots, which deploy apparently sanctioned copy, quotes, and *tifa*; and no Xinhua reports appeared within the

Chongqing press until well after the strike ended; even then, they were edited to appear more favourable to local leaders¹⁴¹.

However, junior commercial publications did not *always* parrot the reporting of the senior Party publication. For example, the decision of the *Chongqing Morning Post* to emphasise a prediction, made by a local official, of a full resumption of operations in a situation where there was obvious uncertainty is notable given that other publications had been circumspect in their deployment of the same quote. This may suggest nothing more than a difference of editorial decision making but the lack of stringent propaganda discipline is significant in this instance.

In terms of the reasons given for the strike, locally there was a clear attempt to impose a strict four-point explanation onto events. Each of these four points had a corresponding policy prescription. However, this was refined noticeably to deemphasise one of the four explanations – the low flag fare – when it became clear that changing this would obviously involve angering taxi customers. These facts reflect well Brady's (2010) notion that media do not tackle problems which have no obvious solution. Where one causal factor for the strike became disassociated from an obvious and straightforward policy response, it was simply removed from the explanation.

Early Chongqing reports, hailed for being unusually open and transparent, presented contradictory messages about the cause of the strike. This suggests a level of unpreparedness for both the protest and the fact that Xinhua was essentially forcing an immediate, and public, local response. Issues that perhaps would have been worked through behind closed doors before being issued to the media were being worked through in something approach real-time and the contradictions this threw up were likely humiliating for the local news spokesman, who was one of the officials later reprimanded. He promised an end to the strike which never came to pass, and used intemperate language in threatening strict sanctions for strikers, later contradicted by Bo Xilai.

¹⁴¹ See the Chongqing Morning Post on November 7th, for example.

Xinhua's reporting, used widely through the Chinese press, appeared to mark the imposition, or perhaps encouragement, of a new media policy when it came to protest events. This needs to be understood as having the most senior approval, and being part of a year-long media strategy to change media response to crisis events. The reporting may be characterised as emphasising the human and de-emphasising the official. Xinhua's willingness to allow its staff to conduct reportage was scaled back on the second day of reporting, where official voices once again came to dominate and the violence of strikers is more pronounced. Nevertheless, the difference with local reporting was stark and there was an attempt by journalists to compare official statements with facts on the ground, and to draw attention to incidents where the two appeared not to match.

There was a distinctly self-congratulatory tone to much of the Xinhua-based reporting and editorialising of non-Chongqing publications. These highlighted the relative openness and criticised explicitly the supposedly outdated methods of stifling awkward information. However, the inherent contradiction in this was that the new centrally-mandated policy of rapid response and transparency was not in evidence in the market where it could be expected to have the most effect – the local Chongqing press. Indeed, in Chongqing, most of the coverage reverted to traditional methods of blame the strike on a minority of troublemakers.

The one publication which drew attention to this was Shanghai's *Oriental Morning Post*. It used Xinhua copy for the most part, but appeared to deliberately draw out and place emphasis on elements of Xinhua's dispatches which were seemingly critical of Chongqing authorities. Moreover, it published two in-house editorials. The first was a general praising of the new approach to crisis response, detailed in the last paragraph. However, the second actually suggested this policy had not been fully implemented and that local transparency was something of a sham. The editorial does not, of course, question the wisdom of media openness. Rather, it exploits the fact that media openness has the approval of national leaders, to damn local authorities in Chongqing.

The behaviour of the *Southern Metropolis Daily* through the strike is extremely unusual. The newspaper is conservative in reprinting sanctioned Xinhua copy – even

removing aspects which appear critical of the local authorities – either side of a single day in which the newspaper publishes an extremely detailed expose that is highly unflattering to Chongqing authorities. It might be characterised as a ‘guerrilla’ approach.

Finally, it is notable the extent to which reports of the *People’s Daily* website mirror the reports in the Chongqing party publication rather than Xinhua, despite the equivalence of their administrative seniority. This suggests the transparency push emanating primarily from Xinhua rather than the Party, and that Party priorities and tactics remain similar, despite the different hierarchical levels of the two publications.

Chapter 8: The Wukan Protest

Protest Narrative

Located on a natural harbour connected to the South China Sea, the Guangdong village of Wukan has approximately 13,000¹⁴² residents. The roots of the 2011 protest date to the agreed sale of a large plot of collectively owned land in the 1990s. At that time, Xue Chang, the secretary of the village Party branch and member of the provincial-level People's Congress¹⁴³, set up a 'collective enterprise' known as the Wukan Port Industrial Development Corporation for which he acted as general manager. The company later partnered with Gangjia Lian Zhiye, a company associated with a Wukan-born¹⁴⁴ Hong Kong businessman, Chen Wenqing. The partnership resulted in the formation of the Lufeng Jiaye Development Corporation. Xue promised 1,200 acres of Wukan land for development, while Chen pledged 22 million Hong Kong Dollars in investment. Both Chen and Xue took senior roles in the company, along with Chen Shunyi, the village head.

Land was progressively requisitioned though the 1990s and 2000s with villagers reportedly being given as little as 100 RMB in compensation. Villagers either did not understand that collectively owned land was effectively being privatised, or took a sanguine view of their loss. The first formal objections were raised in 2009 when a local group, initially founded on an anonymous QQ¹⁴⁵ group, banded together and sent formal Xinfang petitions (see page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**) to both

¹⁴² With approximately 13,000 residents, Wukan would be too large to be considered a 'village' in the context of most Western European countries – even in countries with the largest population densities and may reasonably be thought of as comparable in size to a small Western European town.

¹⁴³ The Provincial (Guangdong) People's Congress is the provincial-tier equivalent of the National People's Congress (*Quanguo Renmin Daibiao Dahui*). It has powers to legislate, to oversee the workings of government and the power to elect major state officials at its tier within the overall political hierarchy. In theory it is the highest organ of state power in the province, though – like its national equivalent – it is generally regarded as a forum for rubber-stamping and lending democratic credibility to decisions taken by provincial level organs of the Party.

¹⁴⁴ *Caijing* reports that Chen Wenqing was born in Wukan and was smuggled into Hong Kong in the 1960s, a time when there were large numbers of Guangdong residents illegally entering the then British-controlled colonial territory.

¹⁴⁵ Tencent QQ, or QQ for short, is a hugely popular Chinese instant messaging service, similar in nature to Microsoft's now-defunct MSN Messenger, Skype's IM platform or Facebook Chat. It allows messages to be shared online between an approved network of friends or contacts.

provincial, prefecture and county-level governments in Guangzhou, Shanwei and Lufeng respectively.

The Lufeng petition was apparently received though delegated down to authorities at the township level. Petitioners were able to have a meeting with township officials but nothing came of their efforts. Over the next two years, the group petitioned a variety of government bodies in Guangzhou, including the provincial party committee, the provincial commission for discipline inspection, the provincial government, the provincial People's Congress, and the provincial branch of the National Land Agency (Zhang, 2012). The progress of these efforts was recorded and disseminated via the same QQ mailing list (ibid). In September 2011, members of the original group attempted to draw more villagers into the fight, apparently spurred by the fact that construction machinery was moving in onto a central area of cleared land. They put up notices pointing out the developments and, on September 21st, led an organised sit-in at the Lufeng government building, protesting the fact that there had been insufficient compensation for the land that was about to be developed.

After being told that the land had not in fact been sold, protestors returned to Wukan and convened at the offices of the village party committee, demanding to see Xue Chang. When he did not appear, some protestors began attacking property associated with the village party committee and businesses owned by Xue and Chen Wenqing. This violence continued throughout the day. Protestors returned to the party building the following day, but riot police had gathered and a pitch battle ensued. Anger allegedly swelled when rumours spread that a schoolgirl had been killed by a shot from police lines, leading to police being pushed back and protestors laying siege to a police station. Police officers and officials remained trapped for most of the day, while six police cars which had been parked outside were overturned.

On September 24th several village representatives travelled to Donghai to meet with Lufeng leaders. In concession, Lufeng leaders promised an investigation into land expropriation, illegal financing and electoral irregularities. On the same day, police returned to the village and order was restored. Xue Chang was removed from office in late September. An Interim Council (*linshi lishi hui*) was subsequently formed, consisting of 12 villagers.

The result of the Lufeng government investigation in early October conceded that some public funds had been misappropriated for the purchase of cars but concerns over land and election fraud were not addressed. On November 17, Lufeng's discipline commission entered Xue Chang and Chen Shunyi in the *shuanggui* system¹⁴⁶. On November 21st, a second collective petition began, with liveried villagers holding banners and forming a three-kilometre long caravan which marched from the village to the Lufeng government offices, some five kilometres north of the village. Villagers delivered the petition and returned to the village where they congregated and continued to shout slogans.

The response of the government was to wait a fortnight before, on December 3rd, arresting Zhuang Liehong, a villager who had been involved in organising the September protest, on charges relating to that earlier event. A police road block was set up on December 7th, stopping Wukan villagers freely leaving the village without showing ID. The following day, Wukan villagers set up their own barricades around the village and became highly active in communicating with journalists. On December 9th, four more alleged protest leaders were arrested by plainclothes police and the Shanwei authorities staged a press conference announcing their actions and discussing some of the background to the protest. Two days later, on December 11th, Xue Jinbo, one of the four arrested two days earlier, died while in a Lufeng detention facility, increasing tensions within the now-besieged village.

Reports of this period paint a contradictory picture, though it is clear that leaving the village was, at the very least, difficult. Images and reports on social media indicate that there were regular gatherings and marches within the village itself. Police attempted to break the barricades on December 11th but were repelled. Overseas journalists began arriving in Wukan from around December 14th and TV crews had gained access to the village by December 15th and released numerous written reports and to-camera video pieces which were broadcast on television and the Internet. Villagers turned a two-storey village building into a de-facto media centre and the siege continued, covered extensively by overseas journalists.

¹⁴⁶ *Shanggui* is a non-civil system of administrative punishment. Though the word, literally 'double regulations' implies an adherence to both civic rules and Party discipline, the *shanggui* system is commonly understood as an internal Party disciplinary structure which deals with cadres on its own terms and out of the public eye.

On December 14th, the Shanwei authorities again staged a news conference to try and deal with the public anger in Wukan, and increasingly on the Internet, around the death of Xue Jinbo. On December 18th, Zheng Yanxiong, the Party chief of Shanwei gave a speech to a closed party meeting chastising villagers for talking to foreign journalists. With negotiations seemingly unable to resolve the standoff, the village had announced that they would attempt to make another collective petition to the Lufeng government on December 21st, a march which would have drawn significant media attention and been highly provocative as a result. Perhaps sensing danger of serious unrest in the eyes of the global media, a provincial working group – consisting of several high profile members of the Guangdong government – held a meeting in Lufeng on December 20th during which the working group's leader, Zhu Mingguo, made conciliatory remarks. The petition was cancelled and Zhu himself entered the village on December 23rd promising concessions and no further arrests of villagers.

On December 28th the results of Wukan's previous village election, in February of that year, were declared invalid. In January 2012, a protester, Lin Zulian, was elected as the head of a newly established Wukan general party branch, a position of relatively little power. Residents elected an 11-strong committee to organise village-wide elections, which then took place on March 4th, 2012. There were voting stations around the village and the elections themselves received widespread coverage. Lin Zulian was elected as village head.

Intermittent reports suggest that the new village committee continued to struggle for public support during 2012 and 2013 over their inability to have stolen farmland returned or adequately compensated. The *Guardian* newspaper reported in March 2014 that one of the protest leaders, Zhuang Liehong, quit his elected position within the village committee in 2013 and fled to the US, seeking asylum. Furthermore, two more key figures from the 2011 protests, and likely replacements for Zhuang – Yang Semaoy and Hong Ruichao – had been arrested on charges of corruption ahead of the 2014 election. One of the key political figures from the event – Zheng Yanxiong, party chief of Shanwei – was promoted to become the provincial propaganda chief in 2013 (Lau, 2013). An announcement that the provincial-level official chiefly associated with

ending the Wukan standoff, Zhu Mingguo, was being investigated for corruption was made in November 2014 (Wang, 2014).

Administrative Orientation

An explanation of China's administrative hierarchy and Wukan's place within it is central to explaining the machinations of the 2011 protest in Wukan. In the English context, a 'village' is normally understood to describe a geographic location, assumed to be rural in nature, and associated with a distinct social identity based on indigenous institutions and organisations. These definitions *may* hold in China, but a Chinese village has an additional definition as an administrative unit. A 'village' in this sense marks the lowest sub-division within China's complex political hierarchy. In this sense, a Chinese 'village' may equally exist in sparsely populated countryside location or – counterintuitively – within a city¹⁴⁷.

China, effectively, has five administrative tiers which vary slightly between the parallel bureaucratic structures of 'Party' and 'State'¹⁴⁸. The most powerful units are, of course, those which belong to the **national** government; below this are the **provincial** level units (which include autonomous regions, municipalities such as Beijing and Tianjin which are under direct national control, and the two SARS of Hong Kong and Macau); below this is the **prefecture** level administration which include, at the upper end of this tier¹⁴⁹, big cities like Guangzhou, but which may also include

¹⁴⁷ Though China has few 'slums' that a resident of Rio de Janeiro or Mumbai might recognise, areas of obvious urban deprivation – characterised by poor infrastructure, dilapidated buildings and tiny subdivided living spaces – are known as 'urban villages'. The title is derived from the fact that many, if not most, are technically administrative 'villages'. Most would have begun as distinct geographic entities which were absorbed into urban spaces through incremental development, particularly in the 30 years since reform and opening up. 'Urban villages' are often where migrant workers live due to the low cost of rent (Miller, 2012).

¹⁴⁸ The government of the People's Republic of China is routinely referred to as the 'Party-State' because of the strategic intertwining of these two organizational hierarchies. The state bureaucracy exists as an independent entity and is, in practice, a civil service tasked with implementing the affairs of government, similar to that found in most Western European nation states. Equivalent units of the Communist Party of China exist down the length of this administrative chain. The party unit is theoretically subordinate to that of the state – which includes 'People's Congresses' at most tiers of the hierarchy – but it is widely acknowledged that the two, ostensible separate, bodies are intimately connected, and that, in case of conflict, power lies with the Party leaders at any given level. Though restrictions apply, it is not uncommon for the same individual to occupy positions in both Party and state structures.

¹⁴⁹ One may view a city like Guangzhou as *either* at the upper end of the prefecture tier or the lower end of the provincial tier. It is governed by provincial level authorities for Guangdong (also based in Guangzhou) but – unlike prefecture-level cities – has independent control of economics and law.

smaller and less economically significant cities; below this is the **county** level, which includes often sprawling county regions, districts within large cities and relatively small 'county-level' cities; finally, there is the **township**. Villages exist below the township level of governance and are not formally connected to the township bureaucracy.

The current arrangement has important resonances with administrative organisation in imperial times where the county level was the point at which a boundary between state and society was marked. At this point, the bureaucratic organs of government stopped (Huang & Yang, 2002). At the grassroots, clan organisations and allegiances had a vital role to play in social organisation. The early totalitarian instincts of the Communist Party meant that the *party* organisation was, and is, constituted right down into village households. However, the *state* bureaucracy has always stopped short of this realm. Though village 'committees' and other organising groups exist, villages in China do not have governments¹⁵⁰ with statutory political powers (ibid).

In the post-Mao years, there have been signs that the Party is willing to step back slightly from this grassroots sphere. Election for village leadership, for example, can theoretically be contested by any individual. Moreover, the advent of household responsibility – explained in more detail below – effectively stripped village leaders of their power over the rights of distribution, thus effectively removing a key component in their local influence. However, village committees are overwhelmingly likely to be dominated by Communist Party members and their links with township cadres and officials, particularly over the sale of collective land, means they continue to exert important influence. All this said, they are not, and cannot be, 'officials' as such, and there are signs that historic clan allegiances are experiencing a revival of importance in local politics, something that Lagerkvist (2012) sees evidence for in the Wukan conflict itself.

This is important when one considers the ultimate outcome of the protest, a formal reconfiguration of local power relations¹⁵¹. This represented an ostensible climb-down on the part of local authorities. However, it was likely palatable only *because*

¹⁵⁰ These would be known as village 'councils' in the British context.

¹⁵¹ Albeit one which was not seemingly able to fundamentally change the central complaint of Wukan villagers – historic land expropriation.

the village leadership structure is not heavily integrated into the administrative bureaucracy. Though Party pride and influence may have been damaged somewhat, the foundations of state power were certainly not.

Wukan's precise place in the administrative hierarchy is important to note as the engagement of these various tiers of government is an integral part of the story of the protest. Wukan village is located within the 'township' of Donghai, a larger urban centre located less than 10km to the north. Donghai is, by turns, under the control of the 'county' of Lufeng. Lufeng is technically a 'county-level city' located midway between Wukan and Donghai, though it has no urban centre, and is dominated by the government offices which administer the county. Lufeng, in turn, comes under the auspices of the prefecture-level city of Shanwei, around 30km to the southeast. The Shanwei authorities are directly subordinate to provincial level government in Guangzhou.

Wukan is located around only 20km, as the crow flies, from Dongzhou, also within the Shanwei prefecture, which was scene of another protracted and violent protest in 2005¹⁵². That protest lasted seven months and culminated in a pitch battle between villagers and police which resulted in at least three deaths¹⁵³. The Dongzhou protest also pivoted on villager anger around perceived illegal land expropriation and was reported widely in the international press and received some minor coverage in domestic media. It's possible to draw some connections between these two events – there seem to be similarities in governance, village culture, and economic conditions, and the proximity is such that verbal accounts of the Dongzhou protest may have spread to Wukan and potentially been instructive for villagers there.

The Protest in Historic Context

Moore (2012), one of the journalists involved in coverage of the Wukan protest, has suggested that the protest's 'success' was related to the fact it *did* garner so much attention. That it did so, he suggests, is down to the villager's media savvy, which may, in turn, be related to the fact that villagers have personal links with Hong Kong and were potentially influenced by media practices there. Moore does not acknowledge

¹⁵² And, to a lesser extent, in 2006.

¹⁵³ This is the official number given in domestic Chinese media.

the other obvious way in which Wukan's proximity to Hong Kong may have played a part: that it made the village readily accessible for the world's media. The fact that the protest caught the attention of global media and, perhaps related, domestic media, certainly seems likely to have played a part in Guangzhou's decision to intervene, and chimes with other research on protest in China which suggest media engagement to be a key factor in the success, or otherwise, of protest actions (Cai, 2009). However, while mindful of this background, this research is not attempting to explain the protest itself, but is analysed here *because* it took place and subsequently received media attention.

Wukan was heralded by some of the foreign journalists present as being something approaching an epochal protest and a revival of the 1989 student movement. In reality, rural land protest has deep precedent in both ancient (Hung, 2011) and recent (O'Brien, 2009; Perry & Seldon, 2000) Chinese history. Given China's size and the prevalence of rural discontent, the uprising is unlikely to have been the only one of its kind in 2011, let alone the previous 22 years.

To understand the discourse surrounding the protest, it is necessary to explain some of the policy aspects which loom large in the background of this particular incident.

Conflicts of interest between lower tiers of government and peasant farmers grew rapidly in the 1980s as the economic shackles were removed from what had, since the early 1950s, been a collectivised system of production. The advent of the household responsibility system, pioneered in secret in the late 1970s and rolled out across the country in the early 1980s, allowed farmers of smallholdings to privately profit from their activities. Land was, and indeed remains, under "collective ownership", with government-issued land contracts guaranteeing use of a particular parcel of land to anyone with a village *hukou* ID. This land could then be tilled for private economic gain.

This reform transformed local power configurations; rural cadres remained tasked with growth quotas and the implementation of unpopular laws such as birth control but were unable to rely on traditional techniques methods of economic control. Coercion was often used as a substitute and disputes escalated.

Village elections began to be pioneered in the 1980s as a response to these rising tensions. Li and O'Brien (1996) and Guo (2001) have documented the sometimes visceral antipathy that has existed between villagers and their immediate leaders – the former resenting the latter's arbitrary and disruptive use of power, the latter often regarding the former as hopelessly Luddite in the face of economic transformation in China. With villages existing outside China's state bureaucracy¹⁵⁴, village elections were a means to make local leaders more practically accountable to their communities without seriously affecting top-down power in the wider political structure. Village elections were phased in across the country from the mid-1980s. Initially, villagers could only select from a list of Party-appointed candidates though, latterly, in the *haixuan* (literally, "Sea of choice") initiative, posts were open to public nomination (Guo, 2001). It should be noted that these privileges have not been universally upheld and, even where elections have taken place, complaints have persisted about the extent to which positions are genuinely accessible to the public.

The potential for tension between villagers and leaders was exacerbated in the 1990s and 2000s as potential economic gains from farming diverged from the potential gains to be made from the development of land¹⁵⁵. Land under collective ownership could, theoretically, be sold to developers with the profits being shared among those whose land¹⁵⁶ was lost. With rapidly rising land prices, such a trend led to the mass loss of farmland, deemed vital by central government for China's overall food security. To combat this, the so-called *dipiao* system has developed. This divides China's total rural land stock into two *kinds*: rural construction land and farmland. If village-owned 'rural construction land' – on which there may be existing factories, warehouses, schools, or houses – is converted into farmland, a *dipiao* credit is produced which can then be sold on rural exchanges to developers. The purchase of this credit then gives that developer the right to develop an equivalent parcel of land at the edge of a nearby city. Thus new farmland is created as villagers take a profit on the sacrifice of

¹⁵⁴ Village cadres play a vital role in administering policy at the grassroots level but there is no specific representation for villages within the state hierarchy and members are, therefore, not 'officials' as such (Li & O'Brien, 1996: 56)

¹⁵⁵ 'Development' should be taken to mean the conversion of agricultural farmland into industrial or residential land which could be then built upon.

¹⁵⁶ Taken to mean the 'land' to which a villager has usage rights. It has previously been explained that no villager *owns* the land he works, but what is bargained for is the relinquishment of *usage rights*.

their land and land rights, and move into denser concentrated developments – either in new village developments or in nearby towns or cities. Meanwhile, developers can expand existing towns or cities, to both service and profit from the national trend of urbanisation, without any net loss in the total stock of farmland (Miller, 2012).

Rapid development and rising prices provide incentives for the powerful to coercively expropriate farmland, while the system of ostensible ‘collective ownership’, as well as political opacity, provides the means. Some have argued that the abolition of a centuries-old ‘agricultural tax’ in 2006 – designed to ease dissatisfaction at the grassroots and signal growing financial strength – may have inadvertently exacerbated this problem by making county and township governments increasingly reliant on the proceeds of land sales to fund their expenditure (Fewsmith, 2010). There is clearly a nexus of power around township officials, who must ultimately sign off on land deals, village chiefs, who are responsible for arranging, agreeing and administering land clearance, and developers looking to obtain land for development. Though villagers must legally be compensated for any loss, the exact terms of compensation are often ambiguous. Moreover, it is the developer – not government – responsible for compensating villagers for the transfer of their ‘land user rights’ (Guo, 2001). The opacity of the political and business structures makes it straightforward for officials to, for example, undervalue land, pay villagers modest compensation, and take kickbacks from developers. Should villagers object to the sale of land, a number of coercive mechanisms may be used, ranging from the quasi-legal – delaying the renewal of land use contracts – to the straightforwardly thuggish.

The Wukan protest represents a confluence of two of the most persistent and intimately intertwined grassroots issues – elections and coercive land sale. Village elections were initially conceived of as a mechanism designed to offer some measure of protection from the coercive sale of collectively owned land. In theory, elections gave local leaders an incentive to work for the collective interest. Failure to do so would result in the loss of local power. In Wukan, electoral fraud and land expropriation were the two core issues at the outset of the protest. However, anger over election fraud was intimately linked with the second economic issue; electoral fraud was the mechanism which allowed land expropriation to take place. The

retention of leadership positions give village Party officials and village heads both the incentive and means to force through land sales for the enrichment of both themselves and leaders within the county hierarchy. In short, the local democracy issue associated with this protest does not appear to be an issue in and of itself. Rather it seems to have been conceived as the means by which the egregious infringement of land rights could be challenged.

Narrative of Domestic Reporting

Phases of reporting

Phase 1 – September 2011

Several newspapers reported the outbreak of violence in Wukan in contemporaneous reports. Though these began by implying the unrest had essentially been resolved, they were followed up with reports detailing violence and injury. An initial news report of the petition was made on the Shanwei government web portal and formed the basis of reports by Xinhua and other major news organisations. This was the only announcement made in the local Shanwei media during this initial phase of the protest¹⁵⁷.

Within Guangdong, the *Southern Daily (Nanfang Ribao)*, the Party mouthpiece of the Guangdong Provincial Committee, reported the Wukan protest in a series of four reports over the course of five days. The first acknowledges the petition but attempts to indicate the issue is at a close. However, the subsequent reports detail violence and injury. The last two reports make clear that the journalist is conducting reportage at the scene rather than using Xinhua copy.

The *Southern Metropolis Daily* carried a prominent, illustrated news story on September 23rd with reporting conducted by its own journalists.

Caijing magazine did not report the incident in its magazine but carried news on its website, largely derived from the same official sources in Shanwei.

¹⁵⁷ The author has not been able to ascertain whether this report appears in the *Shanwei Daily* itself, though many subsequent Wukan-related reports which appeared on the ShanweiGov website did appear in exactly the same form in the pages of the Shanwei Party publication.

Phase 2 – November 2011

The second, very brief phase of reporting surrounded the second petition, which began on November 21st. A solitary news report of the event appeared in the local Party publication, the *Shanwei Daily* on November 22nd, a copy of which also appeared in the *Southern Daily*. The same report was syndicated elsewhere in the Chinese press, and was published in Shanghai's *Oriental Morning Post* and on online news sites, including the website of *Caijing* magazine.

Phase 3 – December 10-15, 2011

December marks the most active phase of both the protest and reporting on the protest. After months of intermittent police action in and around Wukan, a crackdown began on December 7th leading to the arrest of several alleged protest leaders on December 9th. The situation was addressed at a Shanwei government news conference on the same day and led to the first report on the incident in the subsequent day's *Shanwei Daily* newspaper¹⁵⁸. A series of reports then appeared around the press in Guangdong and elsewhere in China, though these adhered to a basic reporting framework established by propaganda authorities in Guangdong.

A second news conference took place on December 14th, which yielded further reporting across the Guangdong press the following day. This was specifically related to reports around the death of Wukan villager Xue Jinbo whilst in custody in Shanwei. This phase of reporting ended on December 15th as the situation in Wukan became increasingly tense and the ongoing siege began to receive heavy coverage in international news outlets.

Phase 4 –December 20, 2011 – January 6, 2012

There does not appear to be any coverage of a speech made by Shanwei Party chief, Zheng Yanxiong, on December 18th at a meeting between village representatives and county leaders in Shanwei. Local media may have broadcast parts of the speech (Patience, 2011)¹⁵⁹ but no reports of the speech appeared in the press, either in

¹⁵⁸ There were earlier reports released online on the evening of December 9th. The dayoo.com news portal, affiliated with the Guangzhou Daily newspaper, was the earliest report found. This can be seen at: http://news.dayoo.com/news/201112/09/85080_20884797.htm.

¹⁵⁹ The author was not able to locate evidence of a live broadcast. Other Anglophone media sources suggest the speech was made at a private government meeting on December 18th, 2011 (Lau, 2013) from which a DVD of Zheng Yanxiong's speech was made and sent into the village as a negotiation

Shanwei or around Guangdong. The Wukan issue only re-emerged in the pages of China's newspapers from December 20th onwards. On this day the *Southern Daily* led the reporting of what may be termed the 'resolution' stage of the crisis. It was the only story which appeared in print on this day, though the content was published by *Caijing* on its website. From the following day, December 21st, onward, the Wukan protest, specifically its resolution, received widespread coverage around the Chinese press. A significant moment occurred on December 22nd with the publication in the *People's Daily* of a prominent editorial praising the provincial government's effort to resolve the crisis and chastising county-level officials. Guangdong publications did not publish independent editorials though the *Beijing News (Xinjing Bao)* carried an editorial on the same day.

In late December the provincial working group staged a number of media briefings which garnered coverage across the Chinese press. The tone of these was conciliatory and there were several admissions of corruption and malfeasance in the village electoral process and land requisitioning.

The period ended with the publication of two lengthy features, one in the Xinhua-affiliated *China Newsweek* in the January 1st, 2012, edition, and the other in the *Caijing*-affiliated *Lens* magazine in its January 6th, 2012 edition. Both articles are presented as investigative reportage and purport to 'uncover' serious abuses at local levels of government.

Caijing did not publish anything in the magazine itself, its December publication dates (on December 5th and December 19th) coming *before* the beginning of the most intense round of protest and then during what appears to be a national media blackout in the days prior to December 20th.

Phase 5 – Spring 2012

There was limited coverage of the election of former protest leader Lin Zulian to the role of village Party leader, on January 16th. *Caijing* wrote a lengthy follow-up feature at the end of February 2012 which offered some new details of the return of Xue

tactic. The fact that a press photographer has imaged (Patience, 2011) a protestor alongside a shot of the Shanwei party chief, displayed on his TV (as opposed to a computer) indicates this was being played from a recorded source, and thus is likely to be the DVD cited.

Jinbo's body and arrangements for upcoming village elections. Wukan was cited in the Chinese press as elections took place in March, though coverage was occasional and less intense than that in the Anglophone media. Reflective stories were published a year on from the incident and many of China's major news portals set up dedicated 'primer' sites to revisit the incident.

Analysis

This section will describe and analyse the reporting and editorialising around this incident. The focus will be on the reporting at the height of the protest event in early December 2011.

Party Media Coverage

Shanwei Reporting¹⁶⁰

The author of the local party publication employs several interesting linguistic and extra-linguistic strategies to represent the protest in print and point to its implied resolution. Unsurprisingly, the author seeks to minimise the significance of the conflict, to suggest imminent resolution and to extol the *diligence, transparency, fairness* and *effectiveness* of the government response. The author also emphasises *solidarity* between the prefecture, county and township-level authorities. None of this is particularly surprising in a Party publication. However, the mechanisms of this are worthy of study.

Stratified government

As the mouthpiece of the Shanwei Party Committee, it is entirely predictable that the Party should emerge from the story's narration with credit. Of more interest is the extent to which gaps may be discerned *between* various tiers of government.

The conflict is presented as being the result of village-tier squabbling which is ultimately rectified by the co-ordinated efforts of the three senior tiers of government. Shanwei – the prefecture level authority – and Lufeng – the county level authority – are explicitly linked; in the recounting of the September conflict, "Party

¹⁶⁰ This section references reporting in the *Shanwei Daily*. This is the only local newspaper found by the author which specifically focused on the Shanwei prefecture, location of Wukan village.

and municipal leaders from Shanwei and Lufeng attached great importance to the issue” (Wu et al, 2011); in November “Party and municipal leaders from both Shanwei and Lufeng” arrived on the scene (Shanwei Daily, 2011a); later, “responsible officials from Shanwei and Lufeng responded promptly (Wu et al, 2011)”.

In the December 10th story, Donghai – the township authority – is cited three times. In the first and last mention, the township is said to be acting on explicit advice from Shanwei authorities, or implementing a decision taken at the senior level. However, arguably the most important political decision reported by the newspaper is said to have been taken at the township level:

...in response to disciplinary issues, Donghai’s party committee has removed Wukan village branch secretary Xue Chang, and deputy secretary Chen Shuyi; accepted the resignation of Chen Shuyi as village committee head; and begun investigations into Xue Chang and Chen Shuyi. At the same time, those members of the village committee with whom there are issues will be removed according to the law and elections will be held to fill the vacancies. (ibid)

There is some ambiguity in the projected role of the Donghai township government. For the most part, it is constructed as junior and lacking in agency, though in the most crucial – and perhaps contentious – aspect, it is accorded absolute authority. The structuring of these entities intones the primacy of senior leaders while affirming the effective functioning of the administrative hierarchy.

Government as active

Through reference to its seamless interlinking parts, the article posits the government at all levels as *active*. This impression is bolstered with other textual strategies. Senior leaders make plans and issue instructions to deal with the problems. There is a clear downward flow of power; senior leaders “give attention” to the issue, “visit” the site of disorder and, once there, “do work”. This work is not further defined – it is an action done *to* a place, rather being the outcome of an exchange. Throughout the article, conflict is resolved by the authorities “doing work”. After this work is done, “the ideas of some villagers began to turn towards the right path” (ibid) – in this construction, the government is diligent and active, the villagers passively ‘corrected’.

Numerous forms of ‘work’ are cited by the author: “rural work”, “persuasive work”, “ideological work”, “transformation work” and, on several occasions, generic “work”. The intended impression is one of a decisive and diligent government response.

In response to earlier upheavals in Wukan, the actions of unnamed but ‘senior’ leaders from Lufeng and Shanwei is presented in heroic, militaristic terms. In September they “immediately hastened to the scene to issue instructions from the vanguard” (*zuozhen zhihui*) (Shanwei Government Online, 2011), while in November “responsible officials from Shanwei and Lufeng responded promptly, commanding from the front” (*kaoqian zuozhen zhihui*) (Shanwei Daily, 2011a). Overall, the tone is one where activity is top-down. Work is done, action is taken, order is restored. There is one mention of villagers as active participants in a hierarchical flow – the masses have given information to officials – but this is only a means for credit to be claimed by officials for acting on that information. Otherwise, villagers are either voiceless within the media texts, or characterised as violent thugs.

Official harmony, village discord

The article is structured around the notion of riotous and unreasonable village behaviour contrasted against political order and efficiency. At the point that government and villagers meet, there is a civilized exchange – villagers make a petition; officials proffer a clear response – but on their return to the village, violence ensues. The village is posited as the site of disorder. Each action by villagers is portrayed as random; each counteraction by government is clear, systematic and bounded by hierarchies. Villagers step outside the boundaries by ‘congregating’, ‘smashing’, ‘blocking’ and ‘destroying’; the authorities ‘plan’, ‘instruct’, and ‘work’. Rather than defending its complicity in the dispute, the government takes on a parental role – one of marshalling and adjudicating, rather than being a participant in the disorder.

A line at the end of the *Shanwei Daily*’s first December report attempts to separate the village from the political hierarchies by suggesting the problem is one of internal squabbling and describes ‘insiders and outsiders’ who have ‘ulterior motives’:

From looking at the incident itself, the entire incident was mainly about internal village contradictions (cunnei maodun). The majority of village

demands are mainly about internal village economic problems.
Nevertheless, the incident has been manipulated, exploited and incited
by some insiders and outsiders with ulterior motives in an attempt to
escalate the situation. (Wu et al, 2011)

There is notable couching in the construction of the first sentence: “the *entire* incident was *mainly* about internal contradictions”. The adjective and adverb in this construction appear to be in jarring contradiction. The sentence’s meaning would be more specific with the inclusion of one or the other of the italicised words. Including both words results in a contradictory textual reality which the author leaves unresolved. Nevertheless, in meeting disorder, the mechanisms of government are presented as operating in a clear, smooth and predictable manner. In the final paragraph of the description of the September riot, the village “returned to normal” (*huifu le zhengchang zhuxu*) after a team from Lufeng and Donghai entered the village to “maintain order” (*chixu zhengchang*).

Order is structured around semantic binaries. Order is “normal” (*zhengchang*); the petition made by villagers is “abnormal”. “Legitimate demands” (*heli de yaoqiu*) are “implemented” (*luoshi*) by authorities, with the implication being that illegitimate demands have also been made. Finally, the article of ends with ambiguous allegations of criminality and conspiracy. Authorities resolve to “strike” (*da ji*) against “leading elements” (*wei shou*) and “core elements” (*gugan fenzi*). “Nevertheless, the incident has been manipulated, exploited and incited by some insiders and outsiders with ulterior motives in an attempt to escalate the situation” (*ibid*).

Government as transparent

The appearance of the conflict in the pages of the only significant local Party newspaper on December 10th must, manifestly, be concerned with projecting a veneer of transparency. The precise audience for this transparency cannot be determined from a textual analysis, though it seems likely that the Shanwei

authorities would have wanted to signal its public relations effort both to senior Party leaders in the provincial capital as well as local readers of the newspaper¹⁶¹.

The author highlights the journalistic mechanisms at work in the construction of the article. The occasion of the government-run news conference is highlighted in the first paragraph, with it being stressed that the government leaders “answered questions from reporters”. The author thus claims authenticity for the article by pointing to the fact that it is the outcome of a negotiated exchange between media workers and officials, rather than the diktat of those officials.

The most obvious effort to generate the impression of transparency is in referencing the conflict directly. The first paragraph employs a common technique for pointing to potential sensitive events by referencing it as an ‘incident’ without further elaboration. The implied definitive article¹⁶² - “the Wukan incident” – suggests a settled, historic matter which need not be explained in detail due to its commonly understood characteristics. However, the second and third paragraphs specifically mention violence, the siege and disorder. Much of this is to discredit protestors and claim credit for officials, but the presence of this detail in the pages of the newspaper suggests an attempt to create the impression of transparency.

There is an admission of fault on the part of some village Party committee members and one local company, but this only bolsters the sense that problems occur within the village. The village is presented as a place of lawlessness and greed. The problem thus becomes one of villager vulgarity rather than Party malfeasance. From an ideological point of view, the solution is thus increased development.

Extra-linguistic strategies

The story also features the by-line of two intern reporters. It seems inconceivable that a story drawn entirely from a single press conference and involving no reportage

¹⁶¹ It should be assumed from studies of Party newspaper audiences that local readers are likely to be Party cadres. Though circulation numbers are often high due to bulk subscriptions, the ‘general public’ have not been a vital constituency for Party newspapers since the 1980s (Zhao, 2008).

¹⁶² Mandarin Chinese does not have definitive articles as such but collocating a place name with the generic term ‘incident’ (*shijian*) has the effect of suggesting it is something established and ‘known’. It works in much the same way that ‘the incident’ operates vis-à-vis the phrase ‘an incident’; the former can, semantically speaking, stand independently within a sentence, the latter demands elaboration demands immediate elaboration.

or external quotes should require three staff to produce. The results of this study indicate that citing of 'intern' reporters in potentially sensitive news copy is a consistent strategy used by Party and commercial newspapers, presumably as a hedge against being found to have reported something politically unacceptable, or to have reported it in an unacceptable manner. This appears to suggest that news production during these protests has not been directly orchestrated by Party propaganda officials, but rather journalists and editors who are attempting to perform 'correctly' but who do not have *absolute* confidence in their tactics.

Southern Daily Coverage

The *Southern Daily* coverage of the December 9th press conference, which appeared in the December 10th edition of the newspaper, has similar but not identical copy. That the main structure of the articles is similar indicates high political sensitivity. That there are differences points to a limited degree of journalistic freedom on the part of the media workers who wrote and edited the stories. This freedom should not be taken to mean freedom to report the press conference – or indeed the protest – in a manner of their choosing; rather it suggests media workers are operating to slightly different priorities.

It is notable that, at face value, the more senior publication takes an ostensibly more aggressive line against the protest. It explains the protest in the following manner:

The briefing analysed the causes of the incident, the main one of which is believed to be the fact that the demands raised by villagers relating to the distribution of benefits has been manipulated, exploited and incited by people with ulterior motives. (Li & Hong, 2011)

In the local *Shanwei Daily*'s coverage of the same press conference, the same basic structure and *tifa* are employed, but the first line is conciliatory and implies a genuine grievance at the heart of the issue:

The majority of village demands are mainly about internal village economic problems. Nevertheless, the incident has been manipulated, exploited and incited by some insiders and outsiders with ulterior motives in an attempt to escalate the situation. (Wu et al, 2011)

Likewise, the *Southern Daily's* explanation of the remedial government steps uses florid language:

Qiu Jinxiong said that...[Lufeng City] has stepped up the work of banning the illegal organisations...captured core elements, including Zhuang Liehong, Zeng Zhaoliang, and Xue Jinbo...and integrated the specific operations that are currently underway in the criminal crackdown and resolutely attack the criminal and evil forces that have infiltrated and manipulated this mass incident in order to effectively maintain social stability. (Li & Hong, 2011)

The *Shanwei Daily* report also contains a very similar final paragraph outlining the government's work ahead. However, it strikes a rather different tone:

...the government will strive to do a good job in the following aspects of work: firstly, to continue to fully implement the reasonable demands of the villagers, particularly issues relating to land, residential development and elections; secondly, to continue to patiently do ideological work with villagers, focusing on sorting out "village representatives" and focusing on persuasion and transformation work of the targets (zhongdian duixiang de shudao zhuanhua gongzuo); thirdly, select the team for the "two committees" as quickly as possible, and form a village security defence team, earnestly safeguarding the stability of the village, and the tranquil and orderly environment for the people (laobaixing); fourthly, to increase the attack on those leaders and core elements. Those involved in illegality will be resolutely attacked so as to propagate the rule of law. (Wu et al, 2011)

There is no reason to believe these quotes are the imaginative work of the author of the report. They are likely to reflect what was said in the briefing. However, it is clear that while adhering to the same structure, the *Southern Daily* report strikes a consistently more aggressive tone. However, this tone is consistently attributed to Shanwei and Lufeng officials. Rather than fuse the journalistic and official voice, the assertions made in the article are attributed to officials at the briefing and, in the case of the final paragraph, a specific individual. By contrast, the *Shanwei Daily* report

personalizes nothing. The words can only be read as the generic activities of government.

These differences may be understood in two ways: firstly, provincial government is keener to project a harder line on protesters to what is a more widespread audience; secondly, that provincial level media workers – and by extension provincial level government – are content to let the work, and words, of junior-level colleagues speak for themselves without additional work in massaging messages. The structural similarities of both reports and use of reasonably consistent *tifa* is evidence of adherence to a singular propaganda message; there is no contradiction or questioning of what might be termed the ‘official’ line. However, the tendency to point clearly to the source of highly aggressive language, suggests the second explanation is more likely.

People’s Daily Editorial

The *People’s Daily* editorial on December 22nd, after compromise had ostensibly been reached in Wukan itself, is a fascinating melange of discourse, and marks an attempt to quickly install the Wukan protest – and its resolution – into the canon of experimental triumphs for the Party.

The text suggests that the handling of the protest marks a ‘turning point’ for the methodology of ‘social management’. An explanation is offered at the end of the second paragraph:

Today’s turnaround concerns the firm belief of the provincial working party that “the primary demands of the masses are reasonable”. (Zhang, 2008)

Thus the primary purpose of the editorial may be said to be signalling that provincial leaders – with the clear support of central officials – had deemed the protestors to be justified and “local government” (*dangdi zhengfu*) to have been negligent. Rather than being a *concession*, the provincial government’s response was to recognise that villagers were correct all along and that the mistake was entirely located at the level of local officialdom.

The structure of the editorial is less about explaining and defending this specific conclusion – the details of the case are barely referenced – and more about establishing the incident’s pedagogical value for junior officials. The ‘Wukan incident’ is presented as a case study which may be used to improve the performance of local government.

Labelling the ‘incident’

The second paragraph of the editorial details some background to the protest:

Since September this year, many villagers have repeatedly made petitions derived from their dissatisfaction with the village cadres’ disposal of land, finance, compensation and other general issues. (ibid)

However, the more serious protest itself is referenced only obliquely. There are references throughout the editorial to the generic term ‘incident’ (*wukan shijian*) which, like its English equivalent, may be used to describe a multitude of occurrences¹⁶³. There are two further semi-explicit references to the protest: the first, in the second paragraphs, deploys the term ‘mass conflict’ (*quntixing chongtu*); the second talks of ‘extreme actions’ (*guoji de xingdong*). In all three cases, there is no attempt to articulate what, specifically, the ‘incident’, ‘conflict’ or ‘extreme actions’ comprised. There is a fleeting mention in the first paragraph which points out the ‘intense’ (*jilie*) emotions of local villagers and the fact that a ‘small thing had escalated’ (*xiaoshi shi da*) and ‘evolved into a mass conflict’ (*yanbian cheng qunti xing chongtu*).

The obtuse referencing of the event has the effect of suggesting the event is at one *simple* and, flowing from this, that it has been comprehensively *understood*. Its simplicity is implied by the refusal to attempt to define, to frame, or to articulate the constituent issues. Events that are complex and contested require unpacking, exposition and other rhetorical treatment so that they become either neutralised and settled, or malleable for political manipulation. Here, we have merely a simple ‘incident’.

¹⁶³ It should be noted that, though generic, the term is frequently used to euphemistically refer to episodes of potential political sensitivity. Readers with basic media savvy are likely to read the term as pointing to an episode of some kind of sensation or controversy.

This implied simplicity, however, need not be a function of the event itself, but rather the implied omniscience of the Party. All ideas, theories, concepts and historical narratives, regardless of their original complexity, may be distilled and reduced if one is sufficiently familiar with the constituent parts. The implication of the repeated use of the term '*wukan shijian*' is that both the Party – the implied authorial voice – and the reader share the sense of the 'incident' as both *simple* and comprehensively *understood*.

There are, of course, inherent contradictions in this position. Firstly, the authorial decision not to articulate or explain suggests the implied audience must necessarily be familiar with the outline of events. The rest of the article would, of course, be rendered meaningless without a common understanding of the analytical reference point. However, there had been no prior discussion of the event in the pages of the newspaper. The implication, thus, is that readers are already familiar with the event and share the senior Party's knowledge but have, presumably, acquired this knowledge from other sources. If the event described really was as quotidian as the terminology suggests, there is no reason believe that an implied audience (of lower level officials) would have this knowledge. Thus, in seeking to downplay or diminish the incident, there is an implicit recognition of its importance.

Secondly, if the incident was so simple, why is there a need to discuss it in the annals of the *People's Daily*? The justification is implied in the title of the article, which ascribed to the 'Wukan Turning Point' the status of a prescription. What has been observed, labelled and understood at the national level may not be seen in the same way lower down the political hierarchy. That an incident has occurred is, as discussed above, assumed to be common knowledge and not worthy of contestation. That it may be branded a 'turning point' (*zhuanji*) is not so obvious.

The manipulation of symbols is key to political communications in any cultural context and symbols may be ambiguously constructed so as to retain the greatest range of potential meanings. What is distinct here, however, is the refusal on the part of the author to attempt to imbue these concepts with any kind of semantic grounding or context. Thus they only make sense in terms of what might be termed the ambient discourse. As discussed, the 'incident' is presented as if it is obvious at a

glance what such an ‘incident’ means. So it is with the proposed remedy, suggested in the editorial’s subheading and the article proper. “... [I]n the face of specific conflicts,” it suggests, “to grasp the masses’ interest demands is to grasp the key to solving problems” (ibid). All four terms here are loaded with ambiguity to the point of vapidness. The conflicts during which this remedy should be carried out are not *all* conflicts, but rather ‘specific’ conflicts. Which conflicts, precisely, is not stated. The primary task of lower level officials is to ‘grasp’. It’s not to ‘speak’, or to ‘listen’, or to do anything which has a concrete physical manifestation. Rather to ‘grasp’ connotes the development of some level of understanding and mastery of a subject but must, by definition, remain abstract. As for *what* needs to be ‘grasped’, it is the ‘interests’ – a term, as described above, which may mean any number of things. And, finally, the people whose ‘interests’ need to be ‘grasped’ are the ‘masses’, a collective label which, while possessing long roots in Leninist political discourse, contradicts starkly the realities of China’s increasingly social and economically sophisticated polity, a complexity which the article later goes on to acknowledge.

Discourses

The dissonance within the article does not apply only to the distance between advice and displayed behaviour. The article also displays a noticeable blending of a range of discourses.

The first, most evident and in keeping with the form of the editorial as a ‘prescription’, is that of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Notwithstanding the fact that it comes immediately after a reference to Lenin, the final line of the editorial makes explicit the remedial tone of the editorial.

The “Wukan Turning Point” tells us that social management must be placed at the helm and the problem of mass interests must be solved if we want to find the right pressure point for reducing social contradictions and lowering the temperature. (ibid)

Momentarily leaving aside the obviously Maoist terminology – ‘mass interests’ and ‘social contradictions’ – the framework for understanding is akin to that of the acupuncturist: management of a complex system through attention to points of stress. The penultimate paragraph presents a more holistic interpretation of the

health of the body politic with the introduction of a triumvirate of problems which need to be addressed: thwarted 'expression', unbalanced 'distribution' and a failure to 'protect' the essential – all redolent of a TCM discourse:

...how can the benefits [of development] be justly distributed? How can interests be clearly expressed? How can benefits relief be guaranteed? Only by properly answering these questions will conflicts and problems arise and pass away, as water flows in a stream and not clog the waterway and cause a raging torrent. (ibid)

The final reference to water draws in another culturally-contingent discourse, that of Daoism which locates water's free flow as one of its core metaphors (Watts, 1977). Indeed, Daoist notions of 'flow' underpin the philosophical basis for many strains of modern TCM but, here, are invoked as a governing strategy.

As alluded to above, interwoven with the medical discourse stands are what may be termed classical Marxist-Leninist references. Frequent mentions are made to 'the masses' (*qunzhong*) throughout the text recalling the assertion, made in classical Marxism, of the ability of the Party to unproblematically speak for, and act on behalf of, all of society. There are two semi-specific references to 'local villagers' (*dangdi cunmin*) against 14 mentions of 'the masses'. In this context, claims that China is in a "period of social transition" and the conflicts [that occur around the country] described as "inevitable" (*biran xing*) take on the patina of Marxist dialecticism. Even the acknowledged 'market society' is said to be in 'continuous advance' (*buduan qianxing*); while 'problems' may 'evolve' in the manner of viral contagion, society 'advances' in the manner of a military unit.

Finally, into this discursive spider's web enters the discourse of market economics. The 'market society' is to be advancing, which has, among other 'contradictions', the 'pluralisation of interest groups' (*liyizhuti duoyuanhua*).

Competition between interests is no bad thing. Only with this kind of dynamic can interests be properly balanced and relations coordinated so that the whole of society is dynamically stable. (ibid)

Here, the notion of “competition” is lauded though not for its ability to generate wealth, but rather as a mechanism for stability and harmony. Overall, what emerges is a promiscuous picture of blended ideologies.

Vocabulary

One of the recurring concepts central to the argument is that the ‘interest appeals’ (*liyi suqiu*). Both terms need to be unpacked. The term *liyi* is most commonly translated as ‘interest’ as it euphemistically divorces the notion of ‘gain’ from any specifically *economic* aspect. In English, as in Chinese, it is perfectly possible to ‘work for the interests of a person’, ‘an institution’, or ‘a country’ without implying that one’s work is going to result in monetary gain, *per se*. However, the term – as in English – is most commonly used in the context of equations of profit or loss. In the article, the penultimate paragraph sets out various collocations, the first and last of which are unambiguously related to money – ‘interest allocation’ (*liyi fenpei*) which, the author claims, needs to be ‘fair’ (*gongzheng*); ‘expression of interests’ (*liyi biaoda*), which need to be ‘unfettered’ (*changtong*); and ‘interest relief’ (*liyi jiuji*) which need to be ‘guaranteed’ (*baozhang*).

The second term, ‘appeal’ (*suqiu*) may also be translated as ‘demand’. In both instances, there is an explicit recognition that ‘interests’ – which are implied, as discussed above, to be primarily economic – are something which are demanded *of* government. In English, one might ‘defend’ interests, or ‘push’ one’s interests, or ‘argue’ in one’s own interests. Semantically speaking, it is difficult to develop a construction in which ‘interests’ are the subject of an appeal to a higher body or power – one may ‘petition on behalf of [someone’s] interests’ perhaps – but the term is usually with a defence of what exists at the individual level, rather than a petition for something to flow down from above. Not so in the discourse of the *People’s Daily* where interests become the responsibility of higher authorities. While this may be regarded as a linguistic tic, the article subtly asserts the tacit and historically-grounded political contract between ruler and ruled as being concerned with economic rights guarantees (Hung 2011; Perry, 2008b; O’Brien, 2009; Bianco, 2001; Yu, 2009a).

Illegality and extremity

It is notable that illegality and extreme measures are only mentioned once in the article. As mentioned at the beginning, the tone of the editorial is one of prescription and remedy for 'social contradictions'. The editorial states that, "Of course the masses cannot be 'radical just because they have demands; as soon as there is radicalism, there is illegality'. Reasonable demands should be resolved within a legal framework" (ibid). However, the very next sentence appears to put the blame for the 'radicalisation' of the masses in this instance squarely on local officials: "Local governments likewise cannot use "blocking" or "pressure" against the expression of normal demands so that they evolved into radical confrontations." In the same paragraph there is an assertion that "local government made initial mistakes" but this is discursively balanced a few sentences later with an explanation that senior leaders had descended to, essentially, 'correct' these mistakes: "This kind of political course to correct mistakes reflects one of our party's most consistent basic tenets: being responsible for the people's interests is to be responsible towards the party's basic cause" (ibid).

Commercial Media

The *Southern Metropolis Daily's* report on December 10th takes as its basis the report that appeared in the *Shanwei Daily* on the same day. The similar structure and language employed by all journalists suggests that, as with the other two incidents dealt with in this study, propaganda strictures are obviously at work. The fact that all reporters arrived at a near-identical narration of the new conference suggests little autonomy in the way the event was allowed to be explained.

However, there are several interesting and subtle differences that emerge in the reporting of the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, many of which point to the newspaper seeking to push against reporting strictures.

Typographically, the story occupies more than half page of the newspaper and is broken into three distinct sections, with the headline appearing in the middle of the story. The story's treatment elsewhere, along with its sensitive nature, makes it reasonable to assume that propaganda guidelines were in place for how this story

should be covered (i.e. non page lead, low-key, no images¹⁶⁴). However, the unconventional appearance of the SMD's marks it out; in contrast to the reports in the Party publications, sub-editors at the SMD have attempted to turn sanctioned copy into something that is likely to appeal to 'lure readers' (*daodu*).



IMAGE 6: SOUTHERN METROPOLIS DAILY, PAGE 12, DECEMBER 10TH, 2011

An important plank of this is the vertical section on the right of the page which list the five 'problems' (*wenti*) which are said to have caused the problems in Wukan.

Through this mechanism, news of the dismissal of village cadres is, effectively,

¹⁶⁴ The China Digital Times website has previously reported similar guidelines reportedly leaked by working journalists in China. Examples can be seen here: <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/01/ministry-of-truth-guangdong-peoples-congress>. Though it has not been possible to verify whether such guidelines were in place on this occasion, the precedent for this *kind of* guideline, along with other evidence presented here, makes it a reasonable assumption.

elevated to a headline issue, even though mention of this is demoted to final paragraphs in other reports.

Textually, the SMD consistently refers to the September protest as the '9.21 incident', a shorthand reference which, through association with 9.11¹⁶⁵, and 6.4¹⁶⁶ dignifies the event with the status of a major event. Notably, this method of referencing the protest disappears in all of the newspaper's subsequent reports on the Wukan protest.

The second paragraph of the main narrative of the protest is identical in form and structure with the *Shanwei Daily* report, though adds a number of significant details. In the *Shanwei Daily*, the recurrence of protest in November is explained as follows:

In the middle part of November, the incident flared up again. (Tan & Shan, 2011)

In the SMD, an explanation for the 'flare up' is inserted into the middle of the sentence.

In the middle part of November, just as a working group was in the middle of investigating the resolution of villager demands, a minority of villagers made a post on the internet which said "Wukan Villagers Provisional Council of Representatives' will organise a demonstration and petition on the 21st [of the month] and invites Chinese and foreign reporters to report" and the incident flared up again. (ibid)

On the one hand, this additional sentence explains the continuance of protest as antagonistic villager behaviour in the face of government action, and cannot be read as being overly critical of official actions. However, in making a point that is, ostensibly, supportive of government actions, the author points directly to the use of the Internet in organizing dissent, and the implied importance of journalists in covering such an event.

¹⁶⁵ Referring to September 11, 2001, the date on which four passenger aircraft were hijacked in the US, two of which were later flown into the World Trade Center in New York City and one of which struck the Pentagon in Washington DC.

¹⁶⁶ Referring to June 4, 1989, the date on which protests in Beijing were finally cleared by members of the People's Liberation Army resulting in widespread injury and loss of life.

It cannot be assumed that the sentence was inserted by SMD journalists. It is possible, for example, that this construction appeared in a set text released by the Shanwei propaganda authorities. However, the additional details that are included by the SMD in the remainder of the paragraph – in contrast to the more vague statements made in Party publications – suggests very strongly that, while working within the strict framework of the officially-sanctioned news release, SMD journalists have inserted details which they have discovered from non-official sources, principally postings or videos put onto the Internet by protesting villagers. For example, rather than ‘some villagers’ (*yi bufen cunmin* – literally, ‘a portion of the villagers’) going to Lufeng to petition, ‘at 10.35 on November 21st, 400 Wukan villagers” went to Lufeng. In addition to explaining that they submitted a petition, the SMD described the slogans they used: “topple (*dadao*) corrupt officials” and “It’s my arable land” (*ibid*). The article explains that “white banners and large posters had been removed” by November 26th. The report not only points out the ‘mass incidents’ that occurred the following day, it explains that these had been planned and communicated to journalists ahead of time.

In sum, where the Party reporting is vague and ambiguous, the SMD adds several significant details. It should be stressed that the journalists are using the framework handed by authorities in Shanwei, and are only reporting – after weeks of silence – after the decision by Shanwei to hold a news conference. Thus, this is not investigative work, or cross-regional reporting in the usual sense.

Beijing News

The *Beijing News* is a commercial newspaper formed by two regionally and hierarchically distinct Party publishers – the national-level, Beijing-based *Guangming Daily* and the provincial-level, Guangzhou-based *Southern Daily*. It was the first newspaper of its kind to operate under such an arrangement. It built a reputation for relatively liberal interjections into debate on national issues, and for being somewhat critical of authorities in Beijing. Its licencing arrangements were altered in September 2011, bringing the newspaper under editorial control of municipal leaders in Beijing.

On December 22nd, the same day as the *People’s Daily* interjection, the *Beijing News* published two articles on the Wukan incident. The first, on page two, is one of the

very few editorials to appear on the Wukan incident during December 2011. The editorial employs the ‘divided government’ discourse employed by the *People’s Daily* – national and provincial government setting high-minded standards; prefectural, county and township-level governments failing in their duties. The editorial employs the language of the key provincial government figure, Zhu Mingguo, but goes beyond his ambiguous prescription for conflict resolution by suggesting that tolerance towards rights-based protest and online supporters is the key, and that such a response would make for a model of crisis resolution which could be exported around China.

The writer – a person identified as an academic, though writing under a transparent pseudonym (Dragon Tree, or *long shu*) – places blame for the troubles entirely on the failure of “the regions to uphold the principle of the rule of law” (*dangdi runeng bingchi fazhi de yuanze*). Though the article uses the term “regions” (*dangdi*) twice, it does make explicit in an early paragraph that it is referring to authorities in Lufeng and Shanwei.

The editorial uses excerpts from the December 20th speech of Zhu Mingguo to criticise the two tiers of local government in Guangdong for failing to meet the standards Zhu Mingguo had articulated, standards that he promised would be enforced from now on:

The villagers began to report problems up the chain on June 21st, 2009. If, during this two years, the relevant departments and officials in Lufeng and Shanwei were able to “emphasise the popular will, and use the greatest determination, the greatest sincerity and the greatest effort” to confront the villagers’ reasonable demands, adhere to the “supremacy of the law”, resolve Wukan’s real problems according to the law, and engage in multiple efforts to explain and communicate, then things would perhaps not have gone out of control, and the series of incidents including smashed up factories would perhaps not have occurred. (Long, 2011)

Here, protest behaviour – violence included – is posited as a straightforward reaction to official actions.

The editorial makes two references to the growth of online opinion, both of which implicitly recognise their active participation in the conflict.

Obviously everyone hopes for a resolution and that issue does not deteriorate, be they the people of Wukan, local government or the many citizens who have been online “onlookers”. (ibid)

Here, online observers are accorded equal status with villagers and local officials. In other words, they are implied to be active participants.

The Internet era has formed an audience of “onlookers” concerned with rights protection (wei quan) which expanded the impact of the incident. These new conditions have given local governments unexpected pressure. This kind of pressure poses a dilemma. (ibid)

The dilemma is one that should be answered with understanding and restraint. In a final flourish which echoes the simplified and rigorously logical prescription of Zhu Mingguo, the author says:

...as long as public opinion is respected, the rule of law is insisted upon, legitimate rights and interests are safeguarded, and criminals are cracked down upon, complex issues can be resolved. (ibid)

However, again, the author wants to extend this and suggest Wukan might represent a new paradigm for “social management”:

...if this logic can actually be implemented then the incident can finally have a perfect solution and be worth the wait. If this is the crux of the issues then other regions will have a good reference point. (ibid)

The *Beijing News*’ associated news report on December 22nd has a lead story on Zhu Mingguo’s task force going into Lufeng to solve the problems. The background story printed underneath is the first and only example found of a journalist using material sourced directly from protestors in their articles:

Zeng Zhaoxian and Zeng Zhaorong, village representatives from Wukan, Lufeng, said that they believed the party and government would deal

with villager demands and solve Wukan's problems during an indirect interview. (Beijing News, 2011)

The information was taken from the previous day's online report on the gd.chinanews.com website, but was not reproduced in any Guangdong newspaper. The "indirect interview" mentioned (*jianjie caifang*) is likely to refer to information gleaned from online exchanges.

Specialist press

Unsurprisingly, the most obvious rupture in the flow of reporting on the Wukan protest comes with the publication, in early January 2012, of lengthy investigative reports in both the Xinhua-affiliated *China Newsweek* and the independent business magazine *Caijing*. Both publications feature reportage and the results of investigative work into the financial histories of the involved companies and officials. They also make eye-catching claims about the treatment of the deceased protester, Xue Jinbo, while in detention in Shanwei. However, Shanwei is posited as the source of problems and there is no extrapolation to wider issues. *China Newsweek* does employ the language and discursive strategies of the *People's Daily's* editorial. There is discussion of Wukan being a "turning point" and heralding a "new situation" (China Newsweek, 2012). Throughout, the intervention of [Guangdong official] Zhu Mingguo is presented as being the straightforward panacea.

Caijing's report¹⁶⁷ is more vivid in its language. It describes, for the first time in the Chinese media sphere, the bloody nature of conflict – "blood was spilt on both sides of the divide" (Zhang, 2012) – but, significantly, reworks the argument that this was a case of dereliction of duty on the part of the local government and presents a complex picture whereby both sides in the conflict "strayed from their original [good] intentions" (ibid) – protestors in terms of their increasingly provocative protests and online postings; the government in terms of its increasingly hard-line stance. In this way, *Caijing* does point at a systemic problem around communication where messages were misconstrued and bad will was allowed to fester.

¹⁶⁷ The report was featured in the January 2012 of '*Lens*' magazine, ostensibly a separate publication but produced within the *Caijing* offices and sometimes given away, at least in part, with the magazine itself.

Caijing's report also hinges around quotations from an interview with Zhuang Liehong, one of those arrested and who, two weeks earlier, had been castigated as a violent criminal in the majority of reporting. Indeed, in describing the rioting and violence that took place, the author suggests a psychological explanation for the actions: "Villagers who had spent so long dissatisfied found a rare emotional outlet" (ibid).

It is notable, however, that both lengthy investigative reports in *China Newsweek* and *Caijing* both include lengthy passages reflecting the officially sanctioned wording from December 21st and December 22nd. Rather than separate these chunks of 'Party speak' from the rest of the text with typographical or stylistic devices, they are integrated into the story.

Conclusions

The Wukan protests of September to December 2011 were characterised by many in the Anglophone media as a great victory for the oppressed peasantry against the arrayed organs of the Chinese state. Contrary to the impression given in many of those Anglophone news reports, one of the organs of the state they were up against was the Chinese press – not in terms of the *absence* of coverage, but rather in terms of the *nature* of coverage. Though its reporting was constrained within fixed boundaries, the Chinese press featured the Wukan protest in its pages. And while media coverage would certainly have been an objective of protestors, the reporting demonstrated a propaganda system that was functioning reasonably efficiently.

The lines of command within the propaganda system remain opaque. However, through an examination of the media texts that were produced, this analysis has sketched the discourses that were in play during the domestic mediation of the Wukan protest. These were certainly tightly controlled, testament to the fact that this was a deeply sensitive event, but the relative openness – relatively being key here – indicates that the Wukan protest was perhaps not as exceptional, or as traumatic, as it has previously been seen.

The Chinese journalism that appeared around Wukan was, in the main, led by managed news releases or press conferences. In September, as the protests began, these were led by reports emanating from the Lufeng propaganda department. While

there was some small typographical variety, propaganda discipline held and Lufeng's version of events was reproduced around the country with little variation. Likewise, during the recurrence of events in November, a solitary report appeared around the press, with no variation between publications from different locations and from different tiers of the press.

Reporting began to become localised as events escalated in early December. Rather than the story being eliminated from the Chinese media landscape, Wukan was reported only in the province in which it occurred, Guangdong. This suggests a focusing of the propaganda effort.

It is notable that throughout the period of the protest, there is no reportage, no attempt and integrating alternative perspectives or voices. Rather discourse is constructed entirely from official sources.

Overall, what emerges in this stage of reporting is an attempt to discuss the ongoing protests as transparently as possible while retaining control of the discourse. One of the means by which this is done is to allow reporting to be led by the closest prefectural government, that in Shanwei. When the Shanwei authorities reported, other media outlets followed suit quickly, in September, November and December. This points to a critical conclusion, reached by others who have looked at protest in China (Cai, 2010, Hung 2011), that, far from being a rare and existentially threatening occurrence, such an event provides opportunity for various tiers of the political structure to demonstrate governing virtues and leadership qualities. These opportunities are most effective in some form of controlled media glare.

The *Southern Metropolis Daily's* December 10th report of the previous day's Shanwei press conference does exhibit some attempt to push back against the propaganda strictures and does suggest that the attempt to instrumentalise the press in crisis management may run up against the instincts of individual journalists and sub-editors. Furthermore, after the intervention of Guangdong's provincial leadership on December 20th, some fracturing can be seen in the way that various publications handled the story, specifically Shanwei's authority to control the discourse absolutely is broken. Again, it needs to be stressed that these changes can be observed only *after* political intervention – there is no suggestion that journalists treated Wukan as

anything other than a highly sensitive story which demanded propaganda discipline. However, this intervention leads to individual publications making fractional changes within the framework of sanctioned reporting. This fracturing occurs along the lines of political tiers. For example, Zhu Mingguo's words in his December 20th speech are edited differently by staff at the *Shanwei Daily* to those at the *Southern Daily* in Guangzhou. Words are not changed, but lines are included, or omitted, which change the tone from one of support for local leadership to one of condemnation.

As in other protests examined in this thesis, the investigative reporting that occurs *after* the most acute stage of the protests has passed is involved and hard-hitting, and free from any discernible trace of *tifa* discipline. The underlying discourse remains – that of benevolent central leaders and errant local officials – but direct discussion of electoral fraud, prison violence and propaganda manipulations is in stark contrast to the majority of news reporting. However, that it occurs only in the specialist press, publications which have national political affiliations, and *after* the protest has dissipated is notable.

The discourses that can be seen around the event hinge mainly on the notion of tiered authority. There is a great and obvious effort to localise the issue, but its national mediation also points to its widespread relevance. It's also notable that, more than in other protests examined in this study, Leninist rhetoric abounds. The villagers are 'the masses'; there is no attempt to describe different interest groups. Door-to-door 'village work' is done to persuade and cajole protestors, the implication lingering that they are incapable of being trusted with complex matters and both *need* and are *capable of* being 'corrected'. These are reported faithfully in commercial press, who do not tone down the Leninist rhetoric at the conclusion of the protest.

Chapter 9: Conclusions

Introduction

This previous chapters have provided a detailed account of the extent and nature of mainland Chinese newspaper coverage of three specific incidents of protest. This has highlighted how it *is* possible for high-profile social unrest to be treated within the mainstream Chinese press, albeit in a limited and cautious manner. This observation cannot be taken to imply that *all* street protest comes under the mainstream media's reporting ambit. The specific confluence of factors which forced these three events onto the public screen is undoubtedly complex and has not been systematically interrogated. However, the mere presence of protest within the Chinese media sphere is a scarcely acknowledged fact in the literature that exists on the Chinese press and the Chinese propaganda system. Most studies have, at best, made cursory reference to a simple, homogenous and highly controlled (and, thus, uninteresting) 'mainland press' response to protest, or, at worst, totally neglected this aspect of the political management of protest. This neglects both the extent and the variety of official, mainstream mediation of social contention.

This thesis is concerned with press function amid political change in China. It has proceeded from the assumption that the CCP has moved from being an ideologically-driven 'vanguard party' in the Leninist sense, one which serves the people by 'enlightened' dictatorial leadership, to an increasingly technocratic and pragmatic entity which is perhaps best seen as 'co-ordinator' amid political, economic and social fragmentation and contention. The Party has consequently moved to position itself as a responsive governing entity, one which both listens – and is *seen* to be listening – to issues of public concern.

Street protest is public concern made manifest, as well as evidence that engagement has, at best failed and, at worst, never existed. For protestors it may be a ploy to *force* a dialogue in the absence of meaningful interaction. For the government, it has generally been assumed that protest is a threat. Assuming protest is explicitly anti-government – and, of course, not *all* is – it *does* point to a breakdown in such an idealised political process. However, as well as a threat, protest invariably presents an

opportunity. Not only may the Party symbolically reposition itself as mediator rather than manager – co-ordinator rather than controller – it affords an opportunity to demonstrate effectiveness and responsiveness.

The overall political response to episodes of street protest is inevitably multi-faceted but, assuming the unwillingness to impose repression – something which is increasingly undesirable in a communications landscape where contestation can easily take place and where credibility is important – symbolic mediation of the interaction between protesters and the Party-State may be increasingly seen as part of a governing strategy. It must, therefore, be considered more closely in terms of theories of ‘authoritarian adaptation’.

The different manner in which protest appears in these three case studies demonstrates significant reluctance, and points to some of the contingent factors which force such contention into the public gaze. These have been acknowledged, where possible. There is significant evidence of vertical and horizontal division in the media response to protest. That is, there were inter-regional variations and as well as differences in the way conflict was handled at the national and local level. The presence of significant elite forces in each of these case studies was also notable. Moreover, outright suppression – the nuclear option – was deployed in each of the cases at least *some* of the time. However, there was sufficient evidence to draw tentative conclusions around press function in an era of ‘authoritarian adaptation’. The first part of the conclusion will attempt to do this.

The second part will discuss the precise nature of the propaganda strategies and techniques which were used in these three cases. As far as the author is aware, these have not been mapped previously, largely because the mainstream mediation of protest in China has not been deemed significant enough to warrant serious study. The previous paragraphs have argued why this may have been a misguided assumption.

Protest in the Media and Authoritarian Adaptation

The presence of media reports on major protest events such as those discussed in this project points to the fact that mainstream media are a key plank in a process of

authoritarian adaptation, discussed at length in Chapter 4. This has been widely acknowledged in terms of the perceived trivialisation and commercial exploitation of the media (Lagerkvist, 2010; Brady, 2010; Stockmann, 2013). However, this study suggests that the media may also play a significant role even in terms of issues of high political sensitivity.

Tong (2008) suggests mainland Chinese journalists and editors are rarely willing to cover 'social events' such as street protests due to the potential political sensitivities of such reportage and concomitant threats to personal careers and livelihoods. The presence of protest within the mainstream Chinese media thus indicates that the authorities tasked with overseeing any given media outlet believe there is a gain to be had from publishing.

Chan (2007) has suggested that opening up space for ostensibly critical reportage has value for the senior tiers of government as well as specific institutions within government¹⁶⁸. Brady (2010) and Leibold (2011) frame this in terms of 'image' and public relations concerns. The appearance of conflict on the public screen does not imply genuine 'responsiveness' or the advent of a new strategy of governance. Rather, it is a tactic of 'popular authoritarianism' where control is maintained through appearing to be responsive. An expanded space for discussion and contention indicates a willingness of the part of the government to assert control in areas that had previously been controlled through outright repression (Tanner, 2004), a tactic that appears increasingly ineffective in the public media age.

The patterns of reporting around the three case studies featured in this project support the notion that Chinese authorities are increasingly comfortable with contention appearing within the public screen. Though there is evident caution and hesitation – discussed further below – protest invariably ends with media texts which herald a transformation. There is a keenness to recognise the positive, progressive forces at work within public contention – similar in some senses to Marxian notions that 'contradictions' act as the midwives of progress (see page 121) – which allows a positive to emerge from an apparent negative. Such a perspective is, ironically, a

¹⁶⁸ See Xin (2012), who points to the determination within the ranks of Xinhua – China's largest and most important news agency – to speed up its response to unplanned and potentially-sensitive events as part of a wider drive to keep itself relevant.

contradiction itself, standing, as it does, in contrast to an indigenous Chinese ideology which sees mass protest as be a potential harbinger of chaos (see pages 51-52).

There was a noticeable determination within media texts to proclaim government responsiveness to public concern as a new, important development. After the Xiamen protest, *Southern Weekend* suggested that heeding public opinion represented “enlightened governance” (see page 165); in Chongqing in 2008, the *Oriental Morning Post* declared that the “intensive” portrayal of disputes through the media “reflects the government’s wisdom and courage in facing complex social problems” (page 230); and in Wukan in 2011, the *People’s Daily* called the handling of the protest a “turning point” in “social management” (page 265). Journalists and editors in each case narrated, often in a highly self-congratulatory manner, a new method which, while poorly defined, suggested new transparency and a renewed intimacy between the public and officials.

The pervasive use of news conferences in both Chongqing and Wukan is significant here, as was the way that media texts made a particular point – usually in headlines and opening paragraphs – of pointing to the fact that dialogue was taking place between officials and ostensibly independent journalists. Indeed, the small differences in ordering and emphasis in the way that news conferences were written up suggests the presence of guidelines without absolute propaganda blueprints (see page 220).

This phenomenon interlinks strongly with the development in Internet censorship – as discussed in Chapter 3 – with outright suppression of information being seen as kindle to the flames of rumours and misinformation, with ‘softer’ techniques being increasingly preferred. The new strategy, as far as it can be discerned, seems to be predicated on, one, the impossibility of complete information *repression*, and two, increased effectiveness of information *management*.

Part of this strategy was an obvious determination to move away from Party meetings and towards news conferences as vehicles for information dissemination. There appeared a longitudinal shift here, with party meetings particularly dominant in protest coverage in Xiamen in 2007. During the Chongqing taxi strike in 2008 and the Wukan protest in 2011, most news coverage pivoted around Party-organised news

conferences. While the output of these conferences was very similar across news organisations – suggesting propaganda discipline – there was clearly an attempt to create the veneer of an open, frank exchange between well-meaning officials and adversarial members of the press. The use of the Q&A format in reporting these conversations – particularly in the Chongqing example – was stark.

Such a shift in tactics suggests that propaganda officials in China continue to ‘cross the river by feeling the stones’ (*mozhe shitou guohe*), that is, evolve tactics through pragmatic experimentation. This was particularly in evidence in the Chongqing taxi strike. Rather than shut down channels of communication until a preferred narrative was distilled at the local level – the obvious *modus operandi* during the Xiamen protest the previous year – Xinhua conducted street reportage with surprising alacrity and its reports were widely syndicated. The specific events of 2008 are likely relevant in explaining this strategy. Damage had been done to China’s global reputation in March 2008 when unrest on the Tibetan Plateau led to Tibet being essentially quarantined. In the information vacuum, rumours and presuppositions held sway, just as they had done five years earlier during the SARS episode. Much greater openness was visible in May 2008 during the Wenchuan Earthquake, when domestic and overseas journalists were allowed to report widely from the scene of the calamity. This appeared to be the case in Chongqing later that same year and a similar approach persisted for some time after¹⁶⁹.

Akhavad-Majid (2004), Wu (2000), Chu (2007), Shambaugh (2007) and Yu (2009b) argues media change in China is invariably a top-down process, but that individual publications and journalists may use the space opened by senior policy decisions to ‘creatively renegotiate’ the rules of the game. The presence of elite actors in fomenting conflict and generating media coverage does appear important in each of these three case studies. In the case of the Xiamen protest, it was the agitation of one Xiamen-based NPCCC member which first propelled the issue of PX into the public arena and resurrected it several times over a span of several months. In the case of

¹⁶⁹ The 2009 Xinjiang riots saw journalists being actively welcomed to the restive province and guided to the scene of activity; publications across the nation becoming markedly critical of the high-speed rail infrastructure project after the Wenzhou rail crash in 2011; even the trial of Bo Xilai in 2013, may be considered in this light, with live ‘tweeting’ of goings on inside the courtroom being broadcast to the nation.

Chongqing, rapid and ostensibly highly transparent reporting appears to have been directed from on high at Xinhua central offices in Beijing, and is likely part of a trend, pronounced in that year, to adopt a more dynamic and fast-paced response to sudden events such as a city-wide strike. In Wukan there was no single elite actor, but senior provincial leaders were drawn into the event through intense overseas media coverage, itself probably a product of internet-enabled communications and easy transport links to nearby Hong Kong, home to a number of foreign correspondents.

At the national level, Xinhua's trumpeting of its own on-the-scene reportage during the Chongqing taxi strike appeared to give certain commercial publications *outside* of Chongqing the confidence to demand even more transparency of Chongqing officials (see the *Oriental Morning Post's* November 6th, 2008, editorial on page 231 for an example). A similar process seemed to be at work in the eye-catching typographical strategies used by the *Southern Metropolis Daily* to emphasise certain aspects of the official Shanwei report of its news conference on December 10th, 2011 (see page 269), as well as the *Beijing News's* editorial, published on the same day as an editorial in the senior *People's Daily*, which expounds on similar themes, critical of local government in Guangdong, while also including sensitive information drawn from Wukan protestors themselves (see page 273). Both examples support theories of media change as a process of 'creative negotiation' (Akhavad-Majid, 2004; Yu, 2011; Chu, 2007) – boundaries defined by elite political forces and renegotiated at junior levels.

The importance of senior publications providing 'cover' for renegotiation at the local level was perhaps most significant in Chongqing. The presence of national Xinhua reportage which jarred heavily with local coverage is a potential explanation for why commercial publications, obviously working within strict propaganda guidelines, made a number of subtle changes to copy sourced from the local Party publication to strike a more frank and conciliatory line. They labelled the strike more directly in front page headlines (see page 210), reinterpreted the word 'criminal' to refer *only* to those who had explicitly used violence (as opposed to being *anybody* who had engaged in the strike in the Party publication [see page 220]), and reworked government quotes to emphasise the local government's apology and deemphasise its 'achievement' in ending the dispute (see page 221).

Of course, the extent of media 'transparency' should not be overstated. The urge for control on the part of the Party-state was strongly in evidence in all three cases in this study and there is obvious hesitancy at important junctures. Both the 2007 Xiamen PX protest and the 2011 Wukan dispute saw periods of virtual blackouts where contention vanished from the national media screen before re-emerging once the perceived danger had passed. Theory may predict that rather than block coverage, the press is tasked with providing nuanced and finely-tuned reports which manage and contain conflict. The 'nuclear' option of centrally-mandated censorship may be less desirable than it once was, but it is still an option and one that is used. Likewise, theories of seamless authoritarian adaptation tend to point to the end of "shopworn conspiracy theories" (Tanner, 2004) in explaining contention. This study has suggested that, at the local level at least, they continue to be used regularly.

Administrative fragmentation

The evanescence of "conspiracy theories" at the local level and their apparent absence at senior levels hints at perhaps the most important finding of this thesis. This thesis has consistently drawn attention to the subtle but important differences that exist in coverage between different publications, as differentiated by region and political affiliation, even in the face of obvious central or provincial propaganda department diktat. The tendency among most scholars who bring China media into their analysis is to refer to the behaviour (or non-behaviour) of the 'mainstream media' and to assume, as Chan puts it, that "the voice of the Party state always prevails" (2007: 559). This thesis would not dispute this on the whole, but what it would dispute is the notion that the Party-state is an unproblematic, monolithic entity. This study has shown the extent to which the behaviour of journalists may reveal fragmented political power within the political hierarchy in China.

There was a surfeit of evidence to suggest that elements within the Chinese press were engaged in a dynamic interaction between themselves. This has already been discussed above in terms of publications using elite cover to deliver implied or explicit criticisms of local governments. More generally, it is possible to see the way the local press in Xiamen, for example, was reacting against other media, the newspapers of the Southern Media Group in particular, and was stirred by agitation in other corners

of the press. Likewise, the Chongqing press's performance had to take heed of the fact that Xinhua journalists were reporting stories which contradicted pronouncements from local officials.

A concept of China's fragmented, 'polymorphous state' (Howell, 2006) helps to explain such differences observed in this study. It also provides a discursive resource. One of the most consistent elements to reporting across the three case studies featured in this thesis is the presence of the stratified government in textual representations of protest. Contrary to the popular conception of the monolithic and homogenous 'Party-state', the manifold tiers of Party bureaucracy are present in reports, and form a crutch to the media workers tasked with publically explaining or justifying contention.

The Wukan protest, for example, saw sharp lines drawn around the five tiers of Party-state bureaucracy, with the junior township, county and prefecture tiers drawn together in solidarity during the early stages of protest, and the national and provincial tiers coalescing in apparent opposition to the junior tiers of government towards the end of the public mediation of the crisis. 'National integration' (Zhao, 2012) was thus achieved with the elevation of powerful central authorities and the undermining of local tiers. That this facet was pronounced in the Wukan protest is perhaps no coincidence. Li and O'Brien (1996) and others have found that the myth of the 'strong centre and corrupt village' is particularly strong amongst rural protestors, and it is notable the extent to which press coverage towards the end of the crisis seeks to play to this conception.

The delineation between the centre and the regions is manifest slightly differently in the Xiamen protest where Party reporting made frequent appeals to protestors on the basis that local plans had the imprimatur of national policy. The assumed superiority of central policy and central supervisory agents was part of the explanation given to local people in Xiamen in the effort to ward off protest, and then castigate protestors where protest took place. However, an equally pronounced discursive strategy was to articulate public contention as evidence for specific concern for the city of Xiamen itself (see page 167 for an example).

In terms of the gap between commercial and Party publications, no broad divisions were found. However, there are two notable trends. In both the Chongqing and Xiamen protest, the Southern (*Nanfang*) Media Group newspapers were extremely active in articulating contention. However, while they both took notably aggressive attacks on regional authorities in Chongqing and Xiamen, they were easily silenced, or – in the case of the Chongqing taxi strike – adopted what might be termed a ‘guerrilla’ approach whereby a series of highly conservative reports sandwiched a lengthy investigative piece which was excoriating of the local government in Chongqing (see page 233). Moreover, the Wukan protest, which took place within the Southern Media Group’s own province, saw the group’s newspapers cleave closely to the group’s leading Party publication which suggests Party defined limits. It is, of course, impossible to say from this research whether this form of ‘guerrilla sniping’ is derived from journalistic or political imperatives. The theories of ‘creative renegotiation’, discussed above, make it likely that inter-regional political rivalry may have opened up the space for the likes of the *Southern Metropolis Daily* and the *Southern Weekend* to work. Where there is no elite political division to exploit, their potency as vehicles of adversarial journalism is neutered.

The other obvious trend was the importance of what Zhao calls the ‘elite’ niche press markets. In both the Xiamen and Wukan protests, it was low-circulation, national publications with senior political affiliations which published long investigative articles which went far beyond the confines of the mainstream news discourse. This elite media appears to float above the fray and, in all three cases, delivered damning verdicts on local officialdom, albeit only after protest had passed. The effect of this is impossible to discern clearly, but resonates with theories of authoritarian adaptation through ostensible transparency (Brady, 2010; Stockmann, 2013) and bolsters Fenby’s myth of the strong centre and weak provinces (2012). The power of the elite press is clearly not without limits. A period of weeks had passed in both cases before magazines published these pieces – time enough for investigation to be carried out and for the threat of further protest to have receded. However, these articles went far beyond anything that had previously been discussed in the mainstream news press. They claim for the news media special importance in fomenting protest and providing protestors a means to express their voice, often in the discourse of

democratic awakening. This is particularly pronounced in the cases of the Xiamen and Wukan protests. Significantly, they point out media censorship in the case of the Xiamen protest, though this is presented as an affordance open to local leaders and no connections are made with such activities at the national level.

Concluding this point, this thesis has argued that change is present and observable, especially in the media realm, and that, in an environment as protean as China's, that change is inevitable. However, rather than search for a linear account of this change, it is more appropriately seen as a negotiation between power holders. Power in China lies at the nexus of business and politics but may vary immensely between the national and local, between regions and between institutional actors. Thus change emerges as linear in one sense, in that – in media, at least – the Party remains firmly in charge, but non-linear in the sense that 'the Party' is increasingly hard to define in simple, monolithic terms.

Propaganda Strategies

The section above has pointed to the significance of protest appearing within the Chinese press. This section will outline some of the strategies deployed by Chinese publications in reporting protest. Once again, these strategies should not be seen as those of guerrilla journalists fighting against an overbearing and dictatorial propaganda machine; the strategies *are* aligned with those of the propaganda machine, even if, as shall be explained, the evidence suggests that government propaganda workers are not *dictating* how events should appear. However, there is evidence of some differences between publications, regions and in the different events which unfolded which, again, problematize the notion of a singular 'China media' and point to inter-regional, inter-administrative tension.

In the main, it can be observed that local news outlets, directed by local Party authorities, take the lead in directing reporting, emphasising the notion that protest is most often about *local* concerns as, as such, deliberately avoided by senior political tiers. The correspondence *absence* of wider reporting suggests a deliberate strategy of allowing local Party tiers to take responsibility in searching for solutions, rather than an elite indifference to such events. News from these local publications may be syndicated nationally but the template for reporting is set at the local level. This trend

was observable in the Wukan and Xiamen protests but was less observable in the case during the Chongqing protest when Xinhua led national reporting at the same time as the local Chongqing press were at work, leading to a dual discourse that was, at times, in opposition.

At the local level, protest coverage tended to display similar characteristics. Most of these are what might be termed 'predictable' responses from a press working to an explicit propaganda model in which achievements are trumpeted and problems obfuscated or otherwise downplayed (Brady, 2010). Firstly, there was a notable *absence* of named leaders during the periods of unrest. Whilst the outcome was unclear, there was collective responsibility exercised by the local government, though the naming of specific officials returned as soon as the unrest ended.

In each of the three events, there was an initial attempt at the local level to suggest nothing important had happened or to suggest that whatever had happened had already stopped happening. This went hand-in-hand with an effort to define the debate and explain, point by point, the specific remedies (see page 215 for an example of how this worked). When unrest persisted, the conflict was symbolically contained *within* this framework, with certain elements of the explanation emphasised or quietly withdrawn. Regardless of the individual specificities, the immediate imposing of a multi-point explanation and corresponding remedy was a common tactic.

In terms of describing the unrest, local publications invariably blamed protest on violence and intimidation of a "tiny minority" and explained wider unrest by claiming that everybody else was merely an "onlooker", linking participation with a historically-constituted, and *passive*, cultural habit (*weiguan*, discussed on page 84) rather than *active*, participation. This strategy again dovetails with a pronounced reluctance to label clearly what has happened. In Xiamen, a mass demonstration was an 'incident' (*shijian*); in Chongqing, a strike was a 'incident' (or, even more euphemistically, 'incident things'); in Wukan, a riot and blockade are both 'incidents'.

After the persistence of serious protest, local media deploy a number of defensive strategies which indicate they are working under caution, rather than under

immediate supervision by the local propaganda bureau: reporters routinely deploy “it is reported” clauses to point to *other* news sources; news by-lines disappear, or are given as ‘interns’. In all three events, local media suggested that sinister forces were at work. Protestors were accused and illegality and the threat of criminal sanction was stated forcefully. Finally, a more conciliatory position is articulated as the scale of protest becomes clear, albeit one which pours scorn on those who have been excessive or used abnormal methods or channels. This conciliatory voice tends to have a moralistic quality, with protestors chided for their failure to grasp the full set of facts.

That such a narrative arc is present and discernable lends credence to those who posit modern China as a state coming to terms with the inevitability of social contention (Lorentzen, 2013). That said, the initial reaction by local media suggested that deploying “shopworn conspiracy theories” (Tanner, 2004) is still a preferred tactic, but that other strategies are forced, by circumstance, to the fore.

In terms of textual tactics, reporting deliberately confuses authorial voice. At moments of tension, the voice of the journalist and the party leaders are one and the same. This operates in tandem with the tactic of removing the names of specific local party leaders from coverage *during* the period of social contention. That said, it was notable the extent to which all three protest events were covered with reference to news conferences at which journalists questioned local government leaders. The uniformity of the output, particularly at local level, suggests this is a tactic favoured to create the veneer of openness.

There appears to be a gradual move away from a focus on elite meetings to a preference for news conferences. In Xiamen in 2007, early reports focus on the elite response, as articulated through emergency meetings of senior representatives. In Chongqing this changes with street-level reportage. Though municipal leaders do later arrange meetings to address problems, these are imbued with an ostensible democratic spirit by the presence of members of the public and protestors. In the Wukan example, there are no reports of the protest through the prism of elite meetings.

In a similar vein, where the build-up of tension is predicted, as in the Xiamen and Wukan examples, local media is clearly instrumentalised before and after periods of protest, in an effort to persuade readers of the fact that protest issues are already being addressed. In Chongqing, unrest appeared to come as something of a surprise as it was fomented within non-visible labour-based communities. Significantly, this appears to have taken place *offline*, unlike the other examples where mainstream media was instrumentalised to intervene against obvious non-mainstream media voices. In all three episodes, there is a general focus on news over commentary. Editorials that are written are generally on tangential subjects and do not address, or refer directly, to protest. They are often apparently written by ‘intern’ reporters, suggesting journalist and editors are not entirely sure of the precise boundaries in which they are authorised to operate and wish to retain a defensive card should they stand accused of transgression.

The above section has highlighted specific textual or editorial tactics. Chapter 4 discussed the importance of language and ideology in media discourse and this next passage will address these issues in relation to the three studied cases.

Some of these “discursive conventions” (He, 2000) relate to textual strategies, described above. These include texts which have strong moral evaluative dimension to the language (Link, 2013a; Barme, 2012; Zhao, 2008); the widespread use of numeration and sloganeering (Barme, 2012); and militaristic language (Link, 2013a; Barme, 2012). These qualities were present in abundance in the texts studied here.

More generally, there was ample evidence of the hybrid blend of discourse Barme has discussed in his work, particularly at the national level. He (2000) argued that “communist ideology” was “gradually dying” but this study suggests Barme is correct to label it “transmogrification”. While in Wukan in 2011, the ‘masses’ were discursively raised time and again from their fitful Maoist sleep, they were frequently aligned with a developmental discourse of competing ‘interest claims’. Similarly, in all three examples, the ‘masses’ were invoked differently, from being ‘offended’ or otherwise disturbed by the behaviour of an initial ‘minority’ (often an ‘extreme minority’) to publications later coming to accept ‘legitimate concerns’ amongst the masses which were being addressed and solved by a diligent and sensitive State

response. In some senses, the invocation of the 'masses' in these two contexts is, to borrow a useful phrase from the Leninist songbook, a 'contradiction'. Yet it is notable the extent to which the core concept remains even as the political position radically alters.

Perhaps the most notable discursive tension seen in these cases was that between a discourse which sought to stress uniformity, harmony and co-operation, and one which recognised the legitimacy of dispute, contention and even conflict. This may be characterised at its most simple as a clash between communist, or Marxist, ideology which stresses fundamental (economic) commonalities among the 'masses' traditional separated by culture, language, ethnicity and manifold other division, and a neo-Liberal ideology which celebrates and encourages diversity as being an engine for growth and development and representing a healthy ecosystem where inevitable tensions may find self-correction and balance. Thus in the case of the Chongqing protest, media emphasised the multiplicity of interests at stake and exhibited strong neo-liberal tendencies in explaining the strike and seeking solutions. In Xiamen, there was a pronounced desire, expressed through media texts, to symbolically unite all Xiamen citizens and to demonize the notion of division – the authorial voice of media texts attempted to embrace, literally, everyone (see page 187). From a slightly different angle, in Chongqing – and Wukan – the local party attempted to present itself as a neutral arbitrator, a presence which hovered *over* the dispute and intervened to defuse an inevitable and natural tension which had arisen. In Xiamen, by contrast, the Party allowed itself to be associated with the source of the dispute and, as such, found itself arguing a certain political position. This necessitated its view being represented as the view of all.

It is interesting to note how this discourse inverts the usual impression of the respective cities. As an early SEZ, Xiamen is at the forefront of economic liberalisation. Chongqing, under Bo Xilai's leadership, was often seen as epitomising a revival of the 'new left' which looked increasingly to the Maoist past. And yet it was in economically liberal Xiamen that the Marxist discourse of unity and harmony was deployed most explicitly, and in Maoist Chongqing that a neo-liberal tone was more clearly struck.

Finally, a division between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ discourse was discussed in Chapter 4 (Link, 2013a; Schoenhals, 1992; Moser, 2006; Barme, 2012). There was some evidence of some elite commentaries rejecting the staid language of Party propaganda but, generally, there was no obvious sign of the ‘unofficial’ making incursions into press discourse. However, there were a couple of hints that the ‘unofficial’ may be deployed strategically. In terms of online discourse, Xiamen’s Party newspaper printed quotes from (pro-government) voices online in an attempt to wrest discursive control from the ‘rumour-mongers’ (see page 175). And in Chongqing, Party leader Bo Xilai went even further and appropriated a slogan he acknowledged as having been drawn from an online commentator (see page 223), albeit one which – in its enumeration and simplifications – maintains the characteristics of Party discourse (Barme, 2012). During the widely-reported public meetings held after the strike, Bo positions the Internet as a source of reasoned discussion from which he, as leader of the municipality, can use to seek solutions.

Moreover, reportage did feature in both the Xiamen and Chongqing protests. These texts emphasised on-the-spot observations and featured natural language dialogue and little sloganeering. In Xiamen, the reportage was conducted by the Party press ahead of a threatened march and appeared to be an attempt – an ultimately *failed* attempt – to interject into the vociferous online debate with a voice which more closely matched those heard in non-mainstream sources as a possible means of allaying unrest (see page 169). Xinhua’s reporting in Chongqing (see page 225) had an even starker feel of reportage but was here deployed in response to a strike which had already begun. Reportage was used by two elite news magazines in Wukan, but only *after* the event, and not as a strategic response to a contemporary threat as was the case in Xiamen and Chongqing.

Implications for Authoritarian Press Theory

These observations demand a return to the widest theoretical discussion, that of authoritarian press theory. Here the findings are ambiguous. The behaviour of elite niche publications and publications with the Southern Media Group are not easily accommodated within authoritarian press models. However, the bounded discourse, the effective censorship, the elimination of non-official voices, the cultivation of a

veneer of openness – all point to a press operating in reasonably synchronicity to maintain harmony and social integration. Many aspects of this research reveal Chinese press operating to a surprisingly old-fashioned script – that of demonising protestors, whispering conspiracy and equating tension with disloyalty and treason – discussed in the previous section. However, the minor but important differences observed point to the necessity to develop theories which better map media behaviour to the authoritarian states different constituent parts, which are occasionally in tension with each other. What is being discussed is “political parallelism” by any other name (see page 114). In China, it has generally been assumed that Hallin and Mancini’s conceptual tool for categorising and analysing media is redundant due to the homogeneity of the Party state. This simplistic understanding looks less obvious if one conceives of the Party-state in terms proposed by Zheng, that is a “competitive oligarchy where factional competition and power-sharing among factions takes place” and where there is an “inclusive hegemony where political parallelism by different social forces takes place” (2010: 177)

Conceptualising both the Party-state and the Chinese press as increasingly fragmented represents a helpful corrective to the tendency among observers of Chinese politics and media to observe intensely strategic thinking in every action. This thesis does make the assumption that the media remains a tool of government and invariably performs in the interests of power. However, the fragmentation of that power makes it hard to envisage every action, or every printed word, working to service a single, strategic purpose. The fragmented nature of nature within China may well explain why different media behave differently and why officials may remark – as one did to the author in 2010 – that journalists are irritatingly antagonistic and adversarial. Such a position is not, this research argues, an expression of media or journalistic power, but an expression of heretical political power. Journalists working for senior political units may well be instrumentalised by those units to put pressure on junior officials, but this works within the political hierarchy rather than outside it. As has been discussed throughout this thesis, many accounts of change in China lean on assumptions borrowed, consciously or not, from transitology, that is the balance

between authoritarianism – repression, suppression, control – and libertarianism – based around ideas of social plurality and freedoms of speech, movement and association. The corollary of this frame is the ‘top-down, bottom-up’ problematic, which sees change as forced upon the authoritarian ‘top’ (read, the Communist Party) by an assertive, liberal ‘bottom’ (read, society), or, by contrast, imposed by the authoritarian ‘top’ (Party) upon the downtrodden ‘bottom’ (society). It is very difficult to escape these binaries entirely and researchers are well advised to declare their hand as best they can. This thesis rejects most aspects of the transitological account without rejecting the frame. In other words, there are identifiable aspects of authoritarianism and liberalism but change doesn’t involve either a unidirectional move from one to the other. It is possible to read an ostensible expansion of the liberal sphere as the activities of an increasingly sensitive state imposing a self-defined version of democracy – in other words, ‘authoritarian liberalism’ (Donald et al, 2002); likewise, an expansion of ‘authoritarian’ state control may equally be willed by an ostensibly ‘liberal’ majority, seeking a bulwark against the actions of a self-interested minority, be they newly-moneyed Chinese entrepreneurs, or imperialist aggressors. In both accounts here, there is a relationship between state and society which is dynamic and symbiotic, and which cannot be described in zero-sum terms.

Theories of the press, much like theories of democracy, are problematic. The press, like democracy, doesn’t just do one thing; it’s necessarily interwoven with historical and cultural contingencies. The search for universals which drove early press theory are doomed to failure – as Hallin and Mancini (2004) predicted – if one’s framework of understanding is stymied by concepts of free, or unfree, liberal or authoritarian, as it was for Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956). If one assumes that the liberal can display authoritarian characteristics, and the authoritarian is liberal at certain junctures, then one realises that perhaps such terms are ultimately unhelpful, thus the search for new frameworks of understanding. The developmental framework has its value. In the same way that the US’s industrialisation and rise to geopolitical dominance at the turn of the 20th century begat a journalist like Upton Sinclair, perhaps the Chinese press, despite its culturally, socially and politically bounded operational practices, also must necessarily play a similar function. However, though the press may, theoretically be ‘liberated’ to perform certain role in mediating

conflict and interests in process of rapid social turmoil and change, it does not follow that the press is 'liberal'. And it this does not mean that power-holders have necessarily withdrawn from their efforts to control. Rather the liberation of journalists may be seen as an instrumentalisation which is still bounded by rules and limits, and which has a power-supporting function.

In many ways, the modern Chinese press *does* resemble a blend of Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's Soviet and Authoritarian Press. Siebert 'authoritarian' press admits to some flexibility as to what the press may publish. Indeed, there may even be some occasions when, assuming the audience is sufficiently limited, there may be scope for nuanced political issues to be discussed. This appears to be the case in terms of the Chinese elite press. However, the press is restricted from engaging the masses and certain subjects – the legitimacy of central authorities – remain impermissible. Publishers who might be reaching a wider mass audience are required to 'announce' and 'explain' the results of private deliberations rather than draw readers into an argument. Schramm's Soviet press is also relevant in terms of the continued relevance of the emphasis on moral instruction, the promotion of 'positive freedoms' (Zhao, 2012) and helping to facilitate centrally-mandated social and economic developments.

There are manifestly times where the Chinese authorities at all levels need to interject in matters of social contention. This interjection necessarily draws on certain assumptions about the role and importance of the state – that it is responsive, effective and necessary. However, beyond this core assurance, there is no coherent ideology which may be discerned. One might argue that this constitutes something akin to 'de-dogmatised dogma' – a system which attempts to make things work without any semblance of a unifying theory, or concern for contradiction. Schell and Delury have argued that Mao's great legacy was an enduring pragmatism and a willingness amongst government for experimentation. This appears to apply as much to the Chinese media as it goes to other arms of government. The move in media is therefore not from 'free' to 'unfree'. It is rather a pragmatic utilisation of tools. The press, though not directly controlled, is leaned on by a Party-State which manifestly retains ultimate power. Thus Authoritarian and Soviet press theories remain useful,

but there is an additional need to create the veneer of transparency and diversity in order to satisfy the increased plurality of the citizenry and the Party itself.

Contributions to Knowledge

A case study methodology can only ever lead to suggestive and tentative conclusions. This thesis' primary claim for a contribution to knowledge comes from a single, and simple, source: this is the first known study to place an exclusive emphasis on the mediation of protest in China.

For all the nuanced scholarly work conducted around areas of political significance in China – social injustice, civil society, governance, demographics, economics – Chinese newspapers still tend to be assumed as operating within a simple, one-dimensional, top-down environment. It is hope that this work will supplement the work of China media focused scholars such as Yuezhi Zhao (1998, 2008) and Chin-Chuan Lee (2000) in delineating the workings of China's diverse and, in many respects, dynamic newspaper industry.

Though protest is not core to this thesis, there is value in terms of the fact that this is one of only a handful of studies to probe protest mediation in China. Though there is much discussion of Chinese protest in terms of its sources, its methods, and its causes, analysis of the reporting of protest in China is absent. In this sense, this study makes a very straightforward contribution to knowledge in that it looks at an area which others scholars have assumed to be either, one, irrelevant, or, two, non-existent¹⁷⁰. The mass protests in Hong Kong between September and December 2014 suggested that others may be beginning to see value in studying the mainstream press for its coverage of issues of contention and protest. Several major newspapers took the time to examine and interpret what mainstream news outlets on the mainland were saying in relation to the protest. However, the persistent framing was one of assuming mainstream Chinese newspapers to have a singular voice and to speak for a singular authority. This study hopefully introduces some caution to this approach.

¹⁷⁰ There are two exceptions, both in work by PhDs at the University of Westminster. Hsiao-wen Lee's (2010) thesis on the public and popular press looked in brief at coverage of the Dingzhou uprising (2005), while Jingrong Tong (2008) looks at a couple of examples of media coverage of incidents of protest using a version of CDA. However, even these do not go much beyond a simple description and do not engage deeply in issues of language.

On a related point, media representations, routinely dismissed from scholarly analysis, have had vital role in the unfolding of protests. In the Wukan protest, examined in this thesis, interviews with villagers suggest reporting in local media intensified the anger felt by villagers, just as it did in 1989 when the *People's Daily* ran its infamous editorial on the “counter-revolutionary” demonstration unfolding in Tiananmen Square (Buckley, 2014). This thesis will act as something of a corrective to the scores of accounts of modern social contention which make scarcely a mention of the way protest events were publically mediated.

Ultimately, this research has aimed to improve theoretical understanding of press function in authoritarian regimes, with appreciation of the varied specificities of Chinese context. China's media system is one which is semi-controlled, and which has come under pressure from non-political sources such as the market, online competition and changing mores amongst young media consumers. By analysing press performance at times of social stress, the fracture lines that manifestly exist within the assumed ‘monolith’ of the mass media – and, by extension, the ‘monolith’ of the unitary Party-state – become clearer. Certain corners of the press reflect certain strands of a diverse, differentiated and increasingly fragmented communist party. Though the press remains an appendage of the state, the way the Party-state, or various parts of the Party-state, instrumentalise the mass media may say something very important about the evolution of both politics and propaganda work in China.

Limitations and Future Research

This thesis may be argued as being overly niche in its focus given the wider and more obviously dramatic political forces that are gathering around China as this thesis is finished in late 2014. Foremost amongst these is China's place within the global economic and political order. This has seen China rise, rapidly in recent decades, to a prominence which Deng Xiaoping cautioned against in the early 1990s and which cuts against the celebrated strategy of ‘hiding brightness and nurturing obscurity’ (*tao guang yang hui*). Governance in China is manifestly more complex in a society which may be characterised as partly-developed, partly-open, partly-prosperous. This thesis has engaged with ideas related to authoritarian resilience. However, the author is

extremely sympathetic to the argument that China's current model of governance will not be tested by a commercialised media, by adversarial guerrilla reporting in a small corner of the press, or by demands from online communities. Rather, the success of the current political model can only be declared after its survival in the face of economic shock and the social convulsions such a shock is likely to produce. Ignatieff puts it well:

The issue is whether...[authoritarian] governance is capable of dealing with radical shocks like a long-term economic slowdown of the kind currently predicted for China" (2014)

Such a shock, of course, cannot be manufactured or modelled for the purposes of an academic study such as this one and so research must proceed on the basis of an assumed robustness within the current governance model. However, the author recognises that discussion of the press is niche when set against the bigger picture.

The precise insights that have been sought in this thesis concern the *reporting* of protest and what this might say about the Chinese media and its function and operation within the communications landscape. The author acknowledges fully that it is difficult to claim knowledge about the *reporting of* protest in China, per se. The specific and highly localised contingencies at work in the three studied episodes of protest make it impossible to claim them as representative or generalizable. The opacity of these factors, rooted as they are in politics, is a problem. As such, while these events *did* see some form of public mediation, they cannot point to other similar events playing out in the same way. The specific combination of variables and factors which may lead to an event receiving mainstream media coverage is of interest, and may represent a future research avenue. However, it is not the precise interest of this thesis.

The thesis obviously lacks an answer to questions of media effects – in other words, do the new strategies and ideas suggested by this research actually work to increase confidence in the Party's governance and allay fears of social disorder? In conversation with the author, one foreign news worker employed by China Central Television (CCTV) suggested that mainstream media has lost all credibility and is disbelieved. Link, likewise, suggests "artificial" official language has generated

widespread cynicism and is widely disbelieved (2014). This research contends that the CCP has not yet given up on instrumentalising the media for the purposes of ideological instruction but, again, the precise *effect* of the media studied in this thesis is not the point. The point is rather what media texts say about the Party-state. Nevertheless, future work may well be conducted to ascertain the effects of this approach amongst media consumers.

Finally, this research has been designed as a cross-sectional study of media behaviours at a particular point in time. However, the case studies examined did span a period of four and a half years which suggests the possibility of longitudinal findings. Indeed, these case studies *suggest* evidence of policy shifts, from a fairly conservative position with Xiamen where local media was allowed to dictate coverage, to a more integrated and ostensibly open national solution, to something of a hybrid, where limited openness is permitted, albeit with outright suppression maintained as an ever present option. The temporal scope of these three case studies is too short to confirm such a trend, and specific local factors will, of course, have influenced what was ultimately reported. But there is some evidence of the shape of the on-going reform to China's crisis response propaganda strategy which may be re-examined in future research. Along similar lines, future research must place a greater emphasis on news disseminated through new media channels. In the period in which these case studies took place, newspapers may legitimately claim to have been paramount in disseminating information and setting a wider media agenda. Stockmann's experimental and survey data suggests Internet usage remained around 20% at a national level and that newspapers were read by around 80% of city dwellers in the 2005-2009 period. Trips made by the author to China in late 2012 and early 2015 confirm comments made by contacts within the Chinese media that newspaper reading has dropped off sharply since this research project began. For a time, China appeared to be resisting downward trends in newspaper reading (Sparks & Zhou, 2012). Not so now. This makes it all the more vital that future research shifts its focus to news output on online platforms.

China makes a fool of anyone who predicts its future. Change is an ever present fact in contemporary China and is dizzying in speed and complexity. This thesis has not

attempted to state what will happen next, not at the level of media reform, and certainly not at the broader level of political change. What seems more attainable is the hope of *identifying* facets of change where they may, hitherto, not have been observed and pointing out why predictions made elsewhere may be based on false assumptions. In this task, this thesis has pointed towards areas where change is possible and negotiable, even without the current political structure being radically altered.

Appendix A: Key Xiamen Anti-PX Protest Translations

China Newsweek

June 11th, 2007 (See reference: Xie, 2007)

Note: The following article was translated from the original Chinese by Joel Martinson of the China media translation site, Danwei.org. It was posted on June 18th, 2007, at http://www.danwei.org/state_media/xiamen_px_sms_china_newsweek.php

Expression of Popular Opinion in the New Media Era

Thirty-two-year-old Ye Zi (name changed) received an email from her friend on 26 May. That was her first time to see the English word PX, and the first time that she was aware that in Nandu, Haicang District, not far from her home on Gulangyu Island, a massive PX (paraxylene) chemical plant was being constructed.

In the email from her friend, Xiamen's PX chemical plant project was described thus: starting production "would be like dropping an atomic bomb on Xiamen Island; it would mean that in the future, the people of Xiamen would live in the shadow of leukemia and deformed children." "This really shook me," said Ye Zi, who calls herself a gentle person who's never been one to get excited.

At first, Ye Zi did not believe that this was true. After searching through materials online, though she found out that things were not as sensational as the email made them out to be, Ye Zi still determined that PX was a dangerous chemical product. And in the following period, she received similar messages about the PX project through MSN and QQ.

At this point, a close friend from high school gave her a phone call asking if she'd received an SMS about PX. This friend urged Ye Zi, saying: "Don't just stay at home with your husband and kid. Look at what's happening outside. Don't forget to put on a yellow band and go out for a walk on 1 June."

Put on a yellow band and go for a "walk"? This gave the timid Ye Zi a pause. But she thought about her son, only three years old, and her life in the future with her whole family breathing PX fumes, and decided to go out. "I hoped to express the true wishes of a citizen of Xiamen," Ye Zi said.

On Friday, 1 June, at 7 in the morning, Ye Zi found a piece of yellow cloth at home. She tore off a strip and put it in her bag, and then went out toward Xiamen Island. Coincidentally, on the ferry to Xiamen Island, she ran into her uncle's family. Talking to them, she found that their aims were identical.

From the city government to S. Hubin Road, Ye Zi and her uncle's family followed a procession of nearly 1000 people, and shouted slogans with them. "However, I kept that strip of yellow cloth in my bag and never dared to take it out," Ye Zi said. What disappointed her was that the good friend who had first urged her to "walk" never appeared for their meeting.

That night, Ye Zi found related news on the scrolling tickers of all of Xiamen's TV stations. But what she thought was just a gentle way of using a "walk" to express her wishes was defined by the Xiamen PSB as an "illegal mass demonstration" that "seriously disrupted public order and disturbed the lives and work of the general public."

This was not the first time that the Xiamen public expressed their will about the PX project.

Proposal

During this year's Two Congresses, 105 CPPCC members signed a joint "Proposal recommending moving the Xiamen Haicang PX project." This became the first key proposal of this year's CPPCC.

Spearheading the proposal was CPPCC member Zhao Yufen, a CAS academician and a Xiamen University professor of chemistry who resides on Xiamen Island.

"If I say PX you may not understand, but you'll definitely remember the November, 2005, explosion at the Jilin benzene plant as if it were yesterday. PX is p-Xylene, a dangerous, highly carcinogenic chemical that causes a high rate of fetal deformations. And the PX project is located in the densely-populated Haicang District," Zhao Yufen said in an interview with China Business.

In the proposal, Zhao and her colleagues set out the safety consequences and pollution threat that the PX project might cause. On the site selection, for example, the proposal said that international practice for similar projects is to have them separated from cities by 70 kilometers; Chinese practice is usually 20 km, but the Haicang PX project is just 7 km from the main city districts.

After this proposal was reported in many papers like China Business, Southern Metropolis Daily, and China Youth Daily, there was an instant, fierce reaction in Xiamen. And more citizens wondered why such a major project connected to the public interest was not announced to the public beforehand.

According to media reports, on 26 March, all the homeowners in the "Future Waterfront" around 4 km removed from the PX project sent a letter to Zhao Yufen saying that the proposal revealed an unsettling inside story unknown to the majority of homeowners. Another letter signed by the villages of Wencuo, Dongyu, and Zhongshan in Haicang District expressed their pleasure at the willingness of the proposal to "offer advice."

Graffiti

On the evening of 8 May, a long-term resident of Xiamen originally from out of town returned to Xiamen from a business trip, passing by the construction site facing the Lujing Hotel east of Xiamen University. He discovered some English-language graffiti of tears, egrets (Xiamen's city bird), and the words "I LOVE XIAMEN," "Everyone is island," "Everyone is Xiamen," and "ANTIPX."

At first he thought that this was graffiti put up by foreigners who loved Xiamen, so he took photos of the graffiti and posted them to his blog. He never imagined that back in his company, a colleague would see the photos on his blog and immediately get a jubilant look in his eyes that said, "I've finally found an organization!" This colleague turned out to be a steadfast opponent of the PX project.

The designer of these pieces of graffiti was eventually confirmed. They were the work of Zhezi, moderately-well-known in Fujian, who had done a "Don't want to graduate" series of works on 6 May. On the night of 10 May, Zhezi posted to his blog: "About ANTIPX, I want to say that I am not an angry youth standing on principles, and I'm not a courageous person."

Zhezi said that this was just the action of a sensitive, cowardly individual searching for his own voice, not opposition or challenge to anything. "So I think that everyone should treasure this land. To know that at this place and time there is someone else writing down the same thing that is in your mind: Xiamen, I love you," Zhezi wrote on his blog.

Even though Zhezi felt compelled to say, "Forgive me for my impotence in the face of reality. Facing PX, facing the pollution in this city, there's nothing but sorrow and wan description," and although there is now no longer any trace of the graffiti in many places lining the route of the walkers around Xiamen University, through the swift dissemination of the Internet, ANTIPX became the unanimous aspiration of the legions of Xiamen environmentalists.

SMS

On 29 May, the media reported that more than ten thousand Xiamen residents were circulating the same SMS message. But before long, the message was screened and it became hard to send or receive it again.

The contents of the basically ran: "The Xianglu Group has invested in a (benzene) project in Haicang District. Should this highly-toxic chemical product be manufactured, it would be like dropping an atomic bomb on Xiamen Island; it would mean that in the future, the people of Xiamen would live in the shadow of leukemia and deformed children. We want to live. We want our health! International organizations have rules that these projects must be developed at least 100 km from cities; Xiamen is just 16 km away from this project! For our children and grandchildren....when you see this SMS please sent it to all of your friends in Xiamen!"

According to this reporter's understanding at the scene, there were not all that many city residents who received the SMS. "I did not personally receive that kind of SMS. I heard that some people around me got it. Everyone was passing it on. And I learned about today's action too," said Ms. Wen, who said she worked at a foreign trade company and who was out "parading" at noon on 1 June.

However, this did not seem to prevent "Have you received the SMS?" from becoming a greeting among Xiamen residents who met each other during that period. Mr. Chen, a man from Anhui who has been driving a taxi in Xiamen for five years, talked about PX with this reporter and had the solemn air of someone who knew inside information. "Just so happens that the past few days I've taken a number of people from Haicang District, and they've all been talking about this."

But at this time, the Xiamen municipal government had not revealed to citizens any further information regarding the PX project, so the "Boycott PX, Protect Xiamen" feeling circulated by SMS gradually covered Xiamen, whose summer sun was unobscured by rain or thunder.

Internet

Ms. Wang, who participated in the 1 June "walk," said that she first learned of the PX project about three months ago on Sina. "However, it seemed that before long the post was deleted," Wang said. In fact, for many local Xiamen residents, it was on the most popular local BBS - Xiaoyu Community - that they learned about the important base for PX.

On 30 May, this reporter tried to access the Xiaoyu BBS but found the message, "The community is temporarily closed for a program upgrade. 2007.05.29." According to one user of the Xiaoyu BBS, they had all received an email from the BBS whose general message instructed them not to post anything having to do with PX. On 5 June, this reporter again tried to access the BBS and found that it had returned to normal.

At the same time, during a period at the end of May, Xiamen's netizens used email, MSN, and QQ to receive information about PX.

Ye Zi received a message on QQ that went like this: "For our children and grandchildren, take action! Take part in a 10,000-person YX [游行, march]. At 8 am on 1 June, set off from your home for the municipal government. Tie a yellow band on your hand. If you have no time to participate, then send this information as widely as possible. For your own life, take action!"

On 2 June, the information sent through these channels went like this: "For two days, spontaneous parades have demonstrated our attitude. Production must continue, life must go on. There is no need to be impetuous and give unlawful elements eager for chaos an opportunity. Let us turn our eyes toward how the government handles the critical issue of the PX project."

"Anticipation for a green home never falters. Let us use soft, quiet means to bring that forth. If you oppose the PX project, then tie yellow scarves everywhere - on your vehicle, on your work desk, on the bag you carry with you....at any place and at any time, ANTIPX, yellow scarves, so the city dances!"

"Walking," ANTIPX, yellow scarves...these became the symbols of the citizens' gentle expression of their opinions.

Appendix B: Key Chongqing Taxi Strike Translations

Southern Metropolis Daily

November 6th, 2008 (See reference: Long, 2008)

Chongqing Taxi Outage – The Background Chain of Exploitation

From early on November 3 until the morning of November 5 --- A taxi strike lasting more than two days came to an end. The Chongqing Municipal Government announced that taxis in the central district resumed normal operation on the morning of November 5. The main cause of the event is considered to be the unauthorized decision by taxi companies to increase the daily fee ['fenqian'] charged to its drivers. An investigation by this reporter has revealed that a multi-layered chain of exploitation has formed within Chongqing's blighted taxi industry. This strike is a part of the expression of a profound sense of resentment felt by overwhelmed drivers.

It is understood that in the majority of Chongqing taxi companies, the total amount needed to contract a car for four years is between 265,000 and 300,000RMB, with the highest price being 408,000RMB. Against this "backdrop", the main driver [of the vehicle] will "logically" transfer his risk onto secondary or replacement drivers, thus creating a varied and diverse system of risk distribution.

"Therefore, this creates the situation where the driver rears the chicken, while the taxi companies take the eggs. The main drivers are forced to deduct secondary drivers' [income], and are free to increase banban fees (ie. fenqian), forming a complete chain of exploitation."

On the road leading from the airport to the city centre, very few of the distinctly bright yellow taxis can be seen. It is the second day after the Chongqing-wide taxi strike began. Although the government has adopted several measures, including research around taxi fare increases, and continuing the strike against illegal cab operators, most drivers are continuing to wait. To drive at this moment is a risky business.

At Shangqingsi station, a taxi is parked up by the roadside. The driver, surnamed Jiang, has just rejected a fare to Shapingba. The transport strike has made people feel insecure, and to reject a fare has become something that seems normal. Behind him stands a black Jetta, touting for business on the street. "Where are you going? Wanna take a bus? The taxis are on strike."

"Illegal cabs are part of the reason, but now illegal cabs are even more widespread," Jiang smiled. This kind of pessimistic mood of frustration is rendered on the faces of drivers in the wake of the strike. [Jiang] is worried about the future.

Jiang took to the street in response to the appeals of the government and his taxi company and tentatively drove down the road. There is a hole in the bottom right corner of the windshield, with a crack spreading across the glass. It looks as if the glass has been bludgeoned. He said that this was the price of driving his cab the previous day. "I parked up at the roadside to use the toilet. When I returned [to the car], it had been smashed with a stone." Prior to this, the Xinhua News Agency had reported that more than 20 vehicles had been attacked during the strike, including three police cars.

"We don't dare go to places that are remotely out of the way." Jiang said that in common with the other taxis on the road, the 'taxi' light atop the cars have all been removed and placed in the boot. This implies that the transport strike wave is continuing.

"The effect is not at all obvious." When the car passed Chenjiaping bus station, the station square was completely empty. Three days ago, it was filled with cars lining up to take passengers. He said, "[the incident has] stirred the government, but the fundamental problems have not been solved."

The collective 'break' that began before daybreak

The timing of the transport strike had been confirmed by at least last Thursday, the previously mentioned driver, surnamed Jiang, confirmed to reporters. The message spread between drivers, especially the night shift drivers. Some taxi companies also becoming aware of the plan but everybody was aware that [the strike] was an inevitability.

As a new day dawned at 5am on November 3rd, not a single taxi could be seen in districts such as Yubei, Yuzhong, Shapingba, Jiulongpo, Nan'an and Jiangbei. Chongqing's urban centre has more than 8,000 taxis but they seemingly 'vanished' overnight. Drivers look on from street-side railings. The feeling of conflict spreads like a germ throughout the city. Whenever a taxi passes by, they stand in front of it forming a barrier, throwing water bottles and asking drivers to stop working and to join the collective struggle (集体抗争).

Even though police have said no malign forces have entered the strike, there is an acute sense of awareness among drivers that the strike, dubbed a collective 'break', has become increasingly acrimonious. At least 20 taxis have been attacked and unauthorized drivers have been warned or even beaten up. Reporters have acquired a photograph showing traffic disruption after an 'unauthorised' taxi belonging to the Lingyang company was surrounded by Chang'an vans and its driver pulled from his vehicle and beaten by a group of men at the Guanyinqiao Ring Road Laogan district centre on the afternoon of November 3. Chongqing police were forced to mobilize in large numbers at Chenjiaping, Yanggongqiao, Tianxingqiao, Fengmingshan and other gathering places in order to maintain transport order.

On normal days, the citizens of this modern riverside mountain city of bridges and rugged roads have plentiful complaints about the taxis which surround them, accusing drivers of cheating, making detours or refusing fares, and discrediting the city. It is only in this moment that they become aware how important they yellow cabs which fill the street are to their lives.

On the morning of the strike, the Chongqing municipal government held an emergency meeting, resolutely preventing the transport strike triggering a chain reaction, and taking measures to ensure that operations returned to normal levels.

At 10am [that day], the official Xinhua News Agency also released rare rolling coverage of the incident, with reports such as "Taxis in urban Chongqing all stop work", and "Four reasons for Chongqing's urban taxi transport strike". Transparency of information eased further deterioration of the event.

At 4pm that afternoon, the Chongqing municipal transport committee set up a news conference where deputy director Liang Peijun explained that four main reasons had caused the urban taxi transport strike: firstly, that contradictions existed in the distribution of benefits between the taxi companies and drivers; secondly, that difficulties faced by urban taxi drivers in refuelling their cars had not been fully resolved; thirdly, that taxi tariff structure was unreasonable; and fourthly, that illegal taxis had disturbed the normal order.

At the same time, under the protection of staff from relevant government departments, hundreds of taxis had gone to Chongqing's busiest central areas, such as Liberation Gate (Jiefangpai) and the train station.

Although the government and taxi companies both pledged to make adjustments, the majority of taxi drivers continued to look on. The minority who dared take to the streets, the previously mentioned Driver Jiang included, saw their vehicles unaccountably smashed up.

Income only starts after earning above 270RMB per day

The chain of exploitation has already given [primary] drivers an unbearable burden; secondary drivers represent the final link [in this exploitation chain]

This is not the first time Chongqing taxis have gone on strike. One insider told this reporter that in July, prior to the Olympics, strike ferment had already taken root among taxi drivers and they had decided on July 14 as the day to take a collective 'break'.

What was different about that event was that the primary complaint concerned difficulties refuelling with natural gas. Use of air-conditioners had increased the speed fuel was depleted, meaning drivers were squandering, on average, around three hours a day waiting to refuel.

The need to preserve stability during the Olympic period meant the government was unusually vigilant and took quick action. At the same time as increasing the supply of natural gas, a special rule was brought in meaning cars, other than taxis, were only allowed to fill up between 10pm and 8am the following day, staggering the peaking refuelling times for cabs. Because of this, a storm was avoided.

However, for the long-suffering Chongqing taxi industry, the solution to the refuelling problem merely deferred the moment when anger would erupt.

According to investigations by one local reporter, the Chongqing taxi industry had decayed over many years and created a multi-layered chain of exploitation. Overwhelmed drivers were full of resentment and sooner or later would break. This transport strike is one part of this process.

Qian Liang, a 28-year-old driver, provided this journalist with a breakdown of his accounts. In the first half of this year, he paid the Guotai taxi company 135,000 RMB in advance fees for the operation rights to his Amagatarai car. Beside this, he paid his company 8,200 RMB every month in 'fees' (份子钱). According to the rules, after a full four years, the vehicle is taken out of usage and the company will only return 20,000 RMB of the advance fee. In four years, according to Qian Liang's calculations, his company will earn 408,600 RMB from him.

Central Chongqing currently has 34 taxi companies which operate 100 or more cabs, with the total number of cabs amounting to nearly 8,000. Journalist investigations have revealed that each company's advance fees are very different.

An investigation among drivers revealed that the Chongqing *Guoji* company charged drivers 160,000 RMB and returned 50,000 RMB at the completion of four years' [service]; the *Guotai* company charged 135,000 RMB and returned 20,000 RMB after four years; the municipal taxi company took 100,000 RMB from drivers and returned 20,000 RMB after four years...

Within this chain of exploitation, Qian Liang numbers one of the "exploited". At the same time, he is an "exploiter". He employs a secondary driver (the majority of taxis have a primary driver, a secondary driver, and a fill-in driver). According to the regulations, 460 RMB needs to be paid to the company in fees (fen'er qian) (230 RMB for the day shift, 230 RMB for the night shift). A months' fees amounts to 13,800 RMB (half of which is paid by himself, and half by the secondary driver). In reality, he only pays the company 8,200 RMB, the remaining 5,500 RMB being returned by the company. However, this money is not returned to the secondary driver.

"I must retain this part of the price differential as I am the one who has invested 130,000 RMB in the car", Liang said. After four years, the company will only return him 20,000 RMB.

Going from the taxi company to the contractor (the primary driver), the secondary driver represents the final link in the chain of exploitation. After working off the daily 230 RMB to cover half of the fen'er 'fee' and the minimum of 30 RMB spent in petrol and 10 RMB for lunch, a secondary driver must earn 270 RMB before he sees any return. One secondary driver told this reporter that, taking last month as an example, he regularly saw only 10 RMB profit for a days' work and occasionally he had to take a loss.

High contract fee forms chains of exploitation

The highest four year contract costs as much as 400,000 RMB, thus creating a system of risk transfer. "Primary drivers are forced to make deductions from secondary and fill-in drivers."

In 2004, Chongqing began to implement taxi reforms, extending the life of a taxi from five to 25 years, moving from contractual operations to corporate operation. Around this time, dozens of "taxi incidents" occurred across China, and the taxi industry could be said to represent an abbreviated version of China's more general course of development.

The urban centre taxi franchise and property rights management system reform plan, a government-issued (Yu Fu Fa) document (No.85, 2003) shows that according to government regulations, for urban taxi operators a one-time payment of 50,000 RMB is levied per vehicle, entitling operators to 25 years of usage, making the average annual cost just 2,000 RMB.

On March 12, 2005, the then-deputy mayor of Chongqing, Huang Qifan, spoke about the management of the taxi industry, saying that only by encouraging the development and expansion of taxi companies and standardizing management could quality and efficiency within the taxi industry be improved. In the past, Chongqing had more than 100 taxi companies but the uncoordinated situation was evident. Through consolidation, the number of companies has been reduced to 30 companies, with seven to eight thousand taxis. These companies were strong, with standardised operations and good prospects for development.

It was at that time that Yang Xiaoming, laid-off and confined to his home, signed a 'taxi labour agreement' with the Chongqing Road Transport (Group) Rental Branch. He paid a 7,000 RMB deposit to become a member of the secondary driver team.

He said, in the process of restructuring the company, the government did not profit. However, having taken a cheap price from the government in order to win operating licence, the price of the licence rose precipitously due to the quota of taxis being limited. This price once broke through the 1m RMB mark, coming close to the record price set anywhere in China for the transfer of a taxi licence.

This explains the increase in contract fees. According to local media reports in 2007, in order to become a primary drive one needed a total investment equivalent to the price of two taxis (Chang'an Lingyang), 115,000 RMB, and a monthly fixed revenue of 10,800 RMB payable to the company. By the beginning of this year, when Qian Liang wanted to step into the taxi business as a primary driver, he needed to pay costs of more than 130,000 RMB, in addition to the 10,000 RMB-plus monthly revenue.

It is understood the total costs of taking a four-year contract with the majority of Chongqing's taxi companies is between 265,000 RMB and 300,000 RMB with the highest cost reaching 408,000 RMB. Against this 'backdrop', it is 'logical' for the primary drive to transfer his risk onto secondary and fill-in drivers, forming a multifarious and multi-layered system of distributing risk.

"It has created a situation where drivers rear the chicken but taxi companies grab the egg! Primary drivers make deductions from secondary and fill-in drivers and at can freely do things like increase fees (banban qian, or fen'er qian), thus forming a complete chain of exploitation," Yang Xiaoming said. After working for a year and discovering that deductions had been made from his salary and pension, [Yang] complained to his company and was then dismissed by the taxi's primary driver.

According to [Yang], drivers in Beijing have a daily 'fee' (fen'er qian) of only 170 RMB, while Shanghai's brothers' daily 'fee' is only 380 RMB. "Though Shenzhen colleagues' fees are as much as 420 RMB per day, they charge a flag fare that is more than 50% higher than in Chongqing. In the nine districts of central Chongqing, fees generally reach 380 or 400 RMB, with the highest as much as 460 RMB!"

Yesterday afternoon, in analysing the causes of this latest strike, the Chongqing municipal government spokesman indicated the main reason for the event was the fact that this year some companies had increased their daily fees by between 50 and 70 RMB, decreasing the annual take-home pay of drivers by more than 20,000 RMB, thereby increasing the economic burden faced by drivers and exacerbating their life difficulties and ultimately creating this social event (*shehui shijian*).

The corruption after the spread of illegal cabs

According to estimates, there is nearly one illegal cab for every 3.5 operating legitimately. Illegal cabs have seriously disrupted the market order

The 45-year-old Yang Xiaoming attempted to break free of this chain of exploitation. Beginning in 2005, he began to formulate and establish "the Chongqing Municipal People's Taxi Company Ltd."

"The company was established through a public offering, with share distributed equally among shareholders, and professionals hired to manage the process. Shareholders only have the operating rights to one vehicle, which he must drive himself. If other drivers are employed to drive the taxi, they must receive the same remuneration as the driver, while the company pays social security fees for all employees," he said, describing the company.

In terms of the chain of exploitation described above, [Yang] altered the middle link. Primary drivers have become shareholders. After taxis have been withdrawn [by the company], they can still be used, thus ameliorating the exploitation of secondary drivers.

But until today, Yang Xiaoming's company remains stuck on the drawing board. The application became stuck in the government administration licencing office as he prepared to register with the Trade and Industry Bureau. He has yet to break through the barriers around the taxi industry

monopoly [in Chongqing]. This stands as a microcosm of China's taxi industry at large. Economist Sun Liping reflects that China's taxi industry is a half-marketised and reformed hybrid (*guaitai*).

In Chongqing, there are other factors intermingling with the institutional decay that has set into the taxi industry. Illegal cabs are considered to be a blight on this mountain city. The November 28, 2007, issue of *Chongqing Morning News* said that the number of counterfeited or cloned taxis operating in the city centre had reached 1500 to 2000 vehicles, seriously disrupting the urban taxi market. According to figures made public by the government which put the number of legitimate cabs at more than 7,000, it may be estimated that there is one illegal cab for every 3.5 regular cabs.

Anonymous industry sources said that the emergence of illegal cars reflects the ineffectiveness of the work of law enforcement officers, and may even be related to corruption among some government departments. In Beibei District, more than 200 unapproved green taxis have been operating for more than six months. The government stands accused of collusion with the illegal car rental companies.

This reporter obtained a copy of one [driver] contract from a taxi company in Chongqing. This contract said that one Lingyang branded 7100 car with an operating period of two years required a one-time basic payment for safety and manufacturing of 110,000 RMB, 80,000 RMB of which would be refunded at the end of the service period, with a monthly fee (*fen'er qian*) of 6,600 RMB charged.

Insiders pointed out that this is a classic black car model which has actually been scrapped, and its licence transferred to a new car, which is why the disparity in fees charged is so great, and why 80,000 RMB is mysteriously able to be returned.

Vice Mayor of Chongqing Yu Yuanmu said that illegal cabs had seriously disrupted the market order, and not only made it hard to ensure the safety of passengers, but also delivered a heavy blow to legitimate taxi drivers' income. The average taxi drivers' monthly income has dropped to between 1500-1700 RMB.

Regular taxi drivers face more stringent regulation. On October 28, in response to the phenomenon of drivers refusing fares and cheating, the Chongqing Municipal Transportation Department implemented new regulations where a driver's credentials will be revoked if more than three complaints are received about them. Although the new rules have a use in terms of the deterrent, most taxi drivers do not think the method is particularly humane and is directed at the needs of the passenger without consideration for the driver.

"This year I have written at least 200,000 words' worth of comments and recommendations which have been sent to every department involved in the review of Chongqing's taxi industry. I've had no replies," Yang Xiaoming said. In his view, the taxi industry in Chongqing is a closed shop. The government refuses to hear outside voices, even though the industry has become rotten.

The background to the speedy recovery of operations

Yang Xiaoming, a celebrity among Chongqing taxi drivers, believes that 'fees' (fen'er qian) do not address the core problem

The taxi transport strike which broke out early on November 3 forced the Chongqing municipal government to pay attention to the lurking dangers within the industry.

As the self-appointed "lead proponent of Chongqing taxi drivers' rights", Yang Xiaoming was finally invited to an interview with relevant government departments on the afternoon of November 4, suspected of being the instigator of transport strike.

"I still would not go as far as to do such a thing," Yang said. While publishing articles and comment in [various] forums over the course of many years, [Yang] has become a celebrity among Chongqing drivers. "I would not participate in mass events. Aside from using the law, I can do nothing but wait patiently."

He believes that the city of Chongqing taxi transport strike may be a turning point. But as the day broke yesterday, taxis once again emerged on the street, drivers with their lights switched off once again began lining up in search of passengers, and the police presence on the street also returned to normal.

As of 5 pm yesterday, as this newspaper went to press, the Chongqing municipal government held a news conference which said that Chongqing's urban taxi operation had basically returned to normal that morning.

The government also announced that it had been following the event closely and assiduously researched [the problem]. The unauthorised increase in driver fees (fen'er qian) by taxi companies was the main reason drivers' were economically burdened and the main cause of the problem was illegal operations.

Municipal government yesterday decided that the phenomenon of unauthorised increased in fees must be resolutely corrected and instructed each taxi company to return 'fees' (fen'er qian) to the previous year's level. Each taxi company expressed its endorsement and support.

Chongqing Municipal Economic Commission said it would increase the supply of natural gas by 100,000 cubic metres daily, easing the problem of 'refuelling difficulties'.

In the press conference, the Chongqing Municipal Government Deputy Secretary-General Cui Jian apologized for the inconvenience that the incident had caused to people and said that municipal transportation had an inescapable responsibility for the occurrence of the incident, and that the current municipal government had already launched an administrative accountability system for the incident and would pursue those responsible within the relevant departments.

Yang Xiaoming was disappointed when he saw the news from the press conference. The government putting the blame [for the strike] on 'fees' (fen'er qian) on scratched the surface, and did not touch on the core issues of the taxi industry.

The transport strike entered endgame at this point. One driver, 'Tianyu', told reporters about the episode. She said that [her] company convened a meeting of all contractors on the afternoon of November 4th requiring them to get back to work, but promising a subsidy of 300 RMB for those who signed in twice a day.

"I did not [return to work] for the 300 RMB," the driver said. Even though there was no sign of pension insurance, "if you don't run around all day [in pursuit of fares], you need to pay every day to keep running an unprofitable business".

When this reporter visited the Chenjiaping main passenger terminal yesterday afternoon, the square was full of parked yellow taxis with drivers loudly attempting to attract fares. Rain saturated the streets and occasionally taxis without their lights on abruptly swung in off the main road.

Appendix C: Key Wukan Land Protest

Translations

People's Daily

December 22nd, 2011 (See reference: Zhang, 2008)

What the "Wukan Turning Point" Shows Us

To grasp the key to solving problems is to grasp the masses' interest demands

The incident at Wukan, Lufeng, Guangdong, recently ushered in a turning point. A provincial working group, headed by vice-secretary of Guangdong's provincial committee and including several departmental level cadres arrived in Lufeng to listen to public demands. With important instructions for the provincial secretary to "directly face and solve these conflicts and problems", the working group adopted a sincere stance which "took seriously public opinion, put the masses first, was people-oriented, totally transparent and elevated the law" which allowed local villagers emotions, which were once intense, to move towards peace.

Looking at the Wukan incident, villagers demands are about their interests; the turning point is about their interests. Since September this year, many villagers have repeatedly made petitions derived from their dissatisfaction with the village cadres' disposal of land, finance, compensation and other general issues. If [the villagers'] economic demands had been grasped in a timely fashion, listened to seriously, judged fairly and decisively solved, a small incident would not have become a big issue, there would have been no escalation and the situation would not have evolved into a mass conflict. The Wukan event may have demonstrated a different trend. Today's turnaround concerns the firm belief of the provincial working party that "the primary demands of the masses are reasonable". This suggests that in the face of specific conflicts, grasping the key to solving problems is to grasp the masses' interest demands.

Today, China is in a period of social transition. Amid the continuous advance of the market society, there will be an inevitable build up contradictions, such as the pluralisation of interest groups, diversification of benefits appeals, and the exposure of conflicts of interest. As the trailblazer for reform and opening up, Guangdong has experienced rapid economic development, a high degree of openness, fast social transformation, a large mobile population, social management pressures, and the early and repeated occurrence of social conflicts which are both typical and cautionary. The land issues which directly led to the Wukan incident are not uncommon in other parts of the country. These issues intertwine individual and public interests, short-term and long-term benefits, so that behind the "unforeseen" conflict, there is actually an "inevitable" impulse.

Competition between interests is no bad thing. Only with this kind of dynamic can interests be properly balanced and relations coordinated so that the whole of society is dynamically stable. Of course the masses cannot be "radical just because they have demands; as soon as there is radicalism, there is illegality". Reasonable demands should be resolved within a legal framework. Local governments likewise cannot use "blocking" or "pressure" against the expression of normal demands so that they evolved into radical confrontations. In the Wukan incident, local governments made initial mistakes and failed to address the villagers' reasonable interest demands, so that rational petition upgraded to extreme actions. The provincial working group will use the "utmost determination, the greatest sincerity, and its best effort" to make a strong commitment to address the reasonable demands of the masses and resolve the intense emotions, and create the basic conditions to allow for a thorough resolution and for local stability and harmony. This kind of political course to correct mistakes reflects one of our party's most consistent basic tenets: being responsible for the people's interests is to be responsible towards the party's basic cause.

In reviewing the many mass incidents of recent years, at heart, they the majority stem from the fact that interest appeals of the masses have not been eased and satisfied. This demonstrates to use that local governments need to be highly conscious of the overall situation when facing interest appeals from the masses, and even contradictions and conflicts. On the one hand, it's important to recognise that "the interests of the people is the ultimate goal of development", and that the most important aspect of politics is to "strive hard to solve the practical issues of benefits that the people care most about and that are most relevant to their lives". On the other hand, we must sweep away the tendency to treat the masses as "enemies" and treat solving interest issues "as a test of a cadre's awareness of the masses, their consciousness of the tenets [of the party] and a touchstone of their leadership competence", truly as their central comrades have demanded.

In fact, effective social management is not about whether contradictions and problems exist; it's about whether contradictions and problems can be effectively contained and resolved. Under the core principle of the rule of law, how can the benefits [of development] be justly distributed? How can interests be clearly expressed? How can benefits relief be guaranteed? Only by properly answering these questions will conflicts and problems arise and pass away, as water flows in a stream and not clog the waterway and cause a raging torrent.

Lenin once said that interests impinged on every single person. The "Wukan Turning Point" tells us that social management must be placed at the helm and the problem of mass interests must be solved if we want to find the right pressure point for reducing social contradictions and lowering the temperature.

Beijing News

December 22nd, 2011 (See reference: Long, 2011)

"We-Kan" Make "the Law Supreme"

If the local government had upheld the principle of the rule of law from the first, clung to the will of the people, and employed the "greatest determination, the greatest sincerity and the greatest effort" in facing the reasonable demands of the masses, the Wukan incident would not have bubbled up to such a huge extent.

According to the *Southern Daily* report on December 20, at a rally for cadres and the masses in Lufeng, Zhu Mingguo, member of the Central Discipline Inspection Committee, and deputy Secretary of the Guangdong Provincial Committee, said that the provincial government attached great importance to the issue, and cared for the mass interest demands in Wukan, and had decided to establish a provincial working group, using the greatest determination, the greatest sincerity, and maximum effort to resolve the reasonable demands of the masses, and to restore normal order to production, life and society in Wukan as soon as possible. A day earlier, Shanwei City announced that it had taken back agricultural land which had been appropriated, and that the village branch party secretary and villager committee director had been entered into the 'shanggui' system.

According to reports, Wukan villagers had been petitioning problems around the requisition of land since June 2009, and that there had been instances of the smashing of public and private property and attacks on police stations since September 21 this year. In November, again made a collective petition, after which the incident gradually caught the attention of the outside world.

The latest updates have given hope to the people that Wukan's problems can be solved. Obviously everyone hopes for a resolution and that issue does not deteriorate, be they the people of Wukan, local government or the many citizens who have been online "onlookers" (weiguan).

Speaking at the meeting, Zhu Mingguo said that "popular will would continue to be emphasised, and that greatest determination, the greatest sincerity and the greatest effort would be used to resolve the masses' reasonable demands", and "problems would be properly resolved through making the law supreme, and following the law and regulation and being reasonable". These were excellent words. As long as the local government and the judiciary respect Wukan villagers' interest demands, adhere to the principle of the "supremacy of law", and resolve the attendant issues in a fair and transparency

manner according to the law, then surmounting “Wukan” would be no problem and solving the Wukan incident would proceed smoothly.

Then again, in the Wukan incident progressing to this point, the village (dangdi) has already paid a high price for “stability maintenance” (*wei wen*). Was it worth it? Where will problems next occur?

In this regard, the Guangdong Provincial Party Secretary Wang Yang believes that “the occurrence of the Wukan incident is both out of ordinary but also inevitable. In a process of economic and social development, this is the result of the long-term neglect of the accumulated contradictions that have occurred in the process of economic and social development, and it is the inevitable consequence of our having promoted one thing while neglecting another.” This can be said to point to the essence of the Wukan incident.

The Wukan incident is indeed a process of the long-term accumulation of contradictions and the process of resolving these has not been carried out according to the law. The villagers began to report problems up the chain on June 21, 2009. If, during this two years, the relevant departments and officials in Lufeng and Shanwei were able to “emphasise the popular will, and use the greatest determination, the greatest sincerity and the greatest effort” to confront the villagers’ reasonable demands, adhere to the “supremacy of the law”, resolve Wukan’s real problems according to the law, and engage in multiple efforts to explain and communicate, then things would perhaps not have gone out of control, and the series of incidents including smashed up factories would perhaps not have occurred.

Indeed, if the local government could have upheld the principle of the rule of law even in recent days, then the Wukan incident would not have bubbled up to such a huge extent.

China faces a period of opportunity and also a period of contradiction and unevenness. In some places, these contradictions are extremely acute and, if not handled properly, can very easily lead to mass incidents. On the other hand, the Internet era has formed an audience concerned with rights protection, which expanded the impact of the incident. These new conditions have given local governments unexpected pressure. This kind of pressure poses a dilemma.

What I want to emphasise is, given the existence of contradictions has been acknowledged, there is no need to overreact to such events and take irrational measures to solve things which may actually intensify the problems. At the moment, the best thing to do is to “talk about the rule of law” and “talk about justice”. If local governments make “rule of law supreme”, the people will naturally make “rational behaviour supreme”. Because of the nature of these events is not complicated, people are mainly concerned with expressing their interest demands and long for real justice.

A similar logic in dealing with [this kind of problem] can be seen when thinking back to previous incidents in Weng'an and Menglian, as long as public opinion is respected, the rule of law is insisted upon, legitimate rights and interests are safeguarded, and criminals are cracked down upon, complex issues can be resolved. With the current Wukan incident, if this logic can actually be implemented then the incident can finally have a perfect solution and be worth the wait. If this is the crux of the issues then other regions will have a good reference point.

Glossary

Journalistic and Publishing Terms

Banner: Headline which runs across of all, or nearly all, of a newspaper page.

Headline: A heading at the top of a page in a magazine or newspaper, or heading a specific news or feature article.

Kicker: A line or short paragraph summarising the main points of an article, often placed immediately below an article's headline and printed in large type.
Synonymous with the term 'standfirst' (see below).

Lede: The first paragraph in a news or feature story.

Page lead: The main story on any given news page, normally identified by a dominant headline and occupying the largest space on a page.

Puff: Small and visually stylized advertisement, often placed on the front page of a publication, pointing to content within.

Pull quote: A small section of text from the main body text of an article which has been extracted and printed in a larger type as a means of stimulating visual interest and/or filling space on a page.

Standfirst: A summary line or brief paragraph, normally located immediately below the headline, which summarises one or more of the article's key points. Synonymous with the term 'kicker' (see above).

Strapline: A subsidiary headline, placed above or below an article's main headline. Synonymous with the term 'subhead' (see below).

Subhead/Subheadline: A subsidiary headline, placed above or below an article's main headline. Synonymous with the term 'strapline' (see above).

Acronyms

CAC: Cyberspace Administration of China (*wangluo anquan he xinxihua lingdao xiaozu bangongshi*)

CASS: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (*zhongguo shehui kexue yuan*)

CCP: Communist Party of China (*zhongguo gongchandang*)

CPCCC: Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (*zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi*)

CQNET: Chongqing Net (*hualong wang*)

CYL: Communist Youth League (*zhongguo gongchan zhuyi qingnian tuan*)

GAPP: General Administration of Press and Publications (*xinwen chubanzongshu*)

ICT: Information Communication Technology

KMT: The Kuomintang party (*guomindang*)

MIIT: Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (*gongye he xinxihua bu*)

NPC: National People's Congress (*Quanguo Renmin Daibiao Dahui*)

OMP: Oriental Morning Post newspaper (*dongfang zaobao*)

PSB: Public Security Bureau (*gonganju*)

PX: Paraxylene, a chemical

SARFT: State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (*guangbo dianying dianshi zongju*)

SCIO: State Council Information Office (*guowuyuan xinwen bangongshi*)

SIIO: State Internet Information Office (*guojia hulianwang xinxi bangongshi*)

SMD: Southern Metropolis Daily newspaper (*nanfang dushi bao*)

SAPPRFT: State Administration of Press, Publications, Radio, Film and Television (*guojia xinwen chubanzongshu guangbo dianying dianshi zongju*)

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