

Problems of *Post-Communism*



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Reconceptualizing the Media

Jonathan Hassid

Despite government attacks, China's newspaper journalists have become increasingly unruly.

ARE journalists in China merely appendages of the party-state? Many researchers seem to think so. On the few occasions that scholars of contentious politics in China have examined the media, it has been in the context of the media's power to shape or suppress contentious behavior by third parties.¹ The conventional view of journalists as part of the party-state, however, is both empirically and conceptually inadequate. Journalists can be, and often are, contentious actors in their own right. This fact leads to two important conclusions. First, and most generally, scholars should broadly reconceptualize the Chinese media to take into account the role of journalists as contentious actors. And second, such behavior by journalists may provide new insight for scholars of contentious politics by highlighting the importance of grievances in sparking collective action. Specifically, the evidence presented here suggests that grievances can inspire action when they—

- Relate to interference with everyday routines (what Snow et al. call “disruption of the quotidian”),²
- Have a specific, visible target or targets, and
- Can be easily framed as a moral rights claim to maximize external support.

Although this article concentrates on the print media,³ the results should be replicable across media types, and the theoretical propositions on grievances and leadership should be easily testable elsewhere.

Contention can take many forms,⁴ and scholars have demonstrated that many systemic factors influence media content,⁵ but this article concentrates on three incidents

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involving Chinese newspapers that fit even the narrowest definition. The incidents were highly visible, clearly intentional, overt acts, as opposed to more debatably contentious acts, such as the publication of unfavorable news or scathing editorials.⁶ The discussion that follows often refers to “the media” as a single entity or group, but this aggregation is merely used for stylistic purposes and should not be construed as implying a seamless, monolithic whole. Indeed, several scholars have pointed out that areas of cultural production outside of “hard” or political news often have much more leeway for action than do the general newspapers detailed below.⁷ The cases presented here therefore represent the most conservative incidents on which to build theory. If such overt phenomena exist even in the most controlled sector of the Chinese media, they certainly exist elsewhere as well.

China’s Changing Media

Some brief historical background is important to understand the momentous changes sweeping the Chinese news media. Before the reform era began in 1979, all media outlets were controlled by the state, the number of media sources was tightly regulated, and outlets such as newspapers were restricted not only in content but even in length and format.⁸ Furthermore, during the Mao era all news providers were funded either directly by the state, indirectly through a policy of forced subscriptions that kept circulation numbers artificially high, or through arrangements whereby organizations agreed to cross-subscribe to each other’s publications.⁹ These mechanisms meant that “the vast majority of the Chinese did not even have the ability to be suspicious of the CCP’s [Chinese Communist Party’s] political system, because they didn’t know that in the outside world a different, worthier life (*geng you jiazhi de shenghuo*) even existed.”¹⁰

Many aspects of the relationship between state and press began to change with Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in the late 1970s. Beijing began to allow increasing commercialization of the media as well as larger numbers of media outlets and types of acceptable content. For example, the number of newspapers alone has risen from 188 in 1980 to more than 1,900 in 2006.¹¹ The number of television stations, radio stations, and satellite broadcasters is increasing proportionally.¹² As the number and content of news access points has increased, so has their financial clout and independence from the government. While Mao-era journalism relied entirely on government funding, today the Chinese news business is market-driven, with advertising revenue rising from zero at the start of the reform era

to \$18 billion in 2005, accounting for nearly 1 percent of China’s gross domestic product.¹³

Economic liberalization has not translated into political freedom, however. Beijing has made clear that it will continue to exercise very tight control over the news media in the short and medium terms, *banning* wayward publications, jailing dissident journalists, and attempting to consolidate control under huge government-run conglomerates.¹⁴ For political journalists at least, the Central Publicity Department (CPD)¹⁵ has engaged in a highly public crackdown throughout President Hu Jintao’s rule, with a number of prominent domestic and even international journalists fired or jailed.¹⁶ The regime has created a generally repressive atmosphere for the Chinese news media, especially for political reporting.¹⁷ And the run-up to the Beijing Olympics has only made the situation more tense for many domestic journalists, with increasing crackdowns on print and on-line content.¹⁸

Studying the News

Previous studies of China’s news media tend to view them in one of two ways—as part of the party-state institutional structure or as an advocate for citizens’ needs.

An Arm of the Party-State. A few scholars of Chinese contentious politics have recognized the inherent importance of the media in their research. Given the tight control the Chinese government routinely exercises over journalists, it is no surprise that these researchers have almost exclusively theorized the news media as a tool of the government. Even Benjamin Liebman, one of the most nuanced scholars and the author of an excellent article on the relationship between the media and contention, writes of the Chinese media as “an arm of the Party-state,” and “one of many competing Party-state institutions seeking to solve problems, expand influence, and force action by others.”¹⁹ The journalist Marlowe Hood notes that “like most societies lacking an independent judiciary and enforceable laws guaranteeing basic rights, China often uses the media to broadcast” stories that help maintain social order.²⁰ Dai Qing, herself a former reporter jailed for her views, goes even further: “In China, the media is [*sic*] regarded as a propaganda tool of the Communist Party. This is in keeping with Mao Zedong’s cardinal doctrine: ‘Revolution depends on two barrels, the barrel of the gun and the barrel of the pen’.”²¹ The strict control the central state maintains over all Chinese news outlets stifles the flow of news about most protests, riots, or potentially destabilizing government actions.²²

A (Potential) Public Champion. The media can thus serve as an important tool of the state in maintaining social order and continued CCP rule, but social-movement scholars have also noted an opposite role, that of public champion. Li and O'Brien argue that "even publication of a single letter or report detailing a case in *People's Daily*, *Legal Daily*, *Township Forum* or *Peasant Daily* can instantly nationalize and legitimize a focus for popular action."²³ And this sort of publication does happen. Although usually tightly controlled at all levels, journalism in China is sometimes responsive to public opinion or mass action. Indeed, one of the founding theoretical principles of journalism in China is that it should reflect "public opinion" (*yulun*) so as to ensure that CCP elites do not become too divorced from the masses. In the 1990s Beijing even periodically campaigned for stronger "supervision by public opinion" (*yulun jian du*) at lower levels of government to ensure conformity with national policy,²⁴ although recently the government has moved away from such encouragement.²⁵

This is more than just talk. One scholar argues that despite the party's desire to keep criticism muted, "Loopholes do exist that allow editors to diverge somewhat from official lines. Editors may devote more space to public opinion than the propaganda apparatus explicitly approves of."²⁶ In China, however, this sort of intervention by the media is rare, as bold news outlets "that report misconduct by local officials can come under pressure or be subject to editorial reshuffles."²⁷ Often, "The media will intervene only when the villagers try something dramatic or when the tension spirals out of control and attracts the attention of provincial or national leaders," writes Liu Yawei.²⁸ Under the right circumstances, the media in China can make or break a social movement, but the literature has not moved much beyond this revelation.

China's Contentious Journalists

The three cases detailed below are somewhat pared down in order to further a larger series of arguments, heeding Tilly and Tarrow's call: "Instead of trying to explain everything about a contentious episode, close in on its most surprising, interesting or consequential features."²⁹ And what is surprising is that although contentious behavior by journalists is not new in China, the years 2004 and 2005 saw an unprecedented increase in the diversity of such behavior, and signs of resistance have continued since then.³⁰ Moreover, this contention at all levels—from individual to cross-organizational—has taken place despite the current political chill over types of media expression that the CCP deems unfavorable.

China Youth Daily. Among the most prominent examples of such incidents is a series of letters of complaint, "accidentally" leaked onto the Internet, from top *China Youth Daily* reporters to their superiors. The new, CCP-appointed editor-in-chief had announced a plan to tie employees' compensation to how favorably senior officials viewed their articles.³¹ In August 2005 a senior editor wrote an open letter in which he blasted both the plan and the paper's management. In the long and scathing letter, Li Datong writes that the new editor "will enslave and emasculate and vulgarize the *China Youth Daily*." Li adds that he is "not so naive as to think that this is a product of [the editor's] personal will. It goes without saying that [the editor] is an executor."³² Li Datong's letter was not the first of its kind, for in May 2004 the director of news, Lu Yuegang, wrote "An Open Letter to Zhao Yong, Secretary of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Youth League," in which he similarly attacked his bosses at the *China Youth Daily*. In response to repeated attempts to impose more political control over the paper, Lu Yuegang attacks not only these policies, but also Zhao Yong personally in a remarkably harsh tone:

You [Zhao Yong] said before you finished talking that you definitely wanted to have a "heart-to-heart talk" (*tan xin*) with everyone. We also want to have a heart-to-heart talk with you. But what kind of talk will this be? Do you think those of us listening to you grew up eating shit (*shi*)? Do you secretly think that the intellect of your audience is so low that we cannot distinguish between a "heart-to-heart talk" and a "reprimand"? You represented the Youth League Secretariat when you demanded that the leadership ranks of the *China Youth Daily* "strengthen [their] studies [of Communist ideology]," but it is the Youth League Secretariat, and you especially, who need to "strengthen [your] studies" even more.³³

Other employees and editors on the paper worked together to publicize both letters: "We had to move quickly, before they [the CPD] started blocking it," recalled one senior editor" who sent Li Datong's missive out to the Internet.³⁴ This action by *China Youth Daily* staff emphasizes the collective nature of the protest.³⁵

Despite the harshness of their comments, however, neither editor was thrown in jail or removed from his job. Li Datong and Lu Yuegang's personal prominence and the paper's high profile were important reasons why the party moved slowly and deliberately in chastising the two men. Initially, they were not punished. In a brief but powerful form of collective action, other journalists had joined the protest by threatening to strike if Li Datong and Lu Yuegang were disciplined.³⁶ The bold action of the two

journalists did not end there, however. When the section Li edited, a weekly supplemental called *Bingdian* (Freezing Point), published an article by a controversial historian challenging the official interpretation of the Chinese Civil War, the CPD decided it was finally time to strike back. In February 2006 it demoted both Li and Lu to a backroom “research” section of the paper and temporarily closed down *Freezing Point*. When the supplement relaunched five weeks later, it did so without its crusading editors.³⁷ Even with public stature and the backing of colleagues, then, journalists can only push the government so far before facing serious consequences.

Beijing News. But contentious incidents like this one are not confined to individual journalists. Occasionally, whole papers become involved, as happened with the *Xin Jing Bao* (Beijing News) in late December 2005: “Reporters stopped filing articles . . . after Mr. Yang [Yang Bin, the editor-in-chief and an outspoken CCP critic] was moved aside, employees told The Associated Press. Some reports suggested that up to a quarter of the paper’s 400 editorial staff walked out.”³⁸ The order for Yang’s removal apparently came straight from the highest reaches of the government and originally included the dismissal of several deputy editors and the transfer of editorial control to the staid central government paper *Guangming Daily*, one of the co-owners of the *Beijing News*. After a strike that lasted several days, both sides agreed to a face-saving measure whereby Yang Bin was removed from his post, but the deputy editors retained their jobs and the *Guangming Daily* received somewhat less control than initially announced.³⁹

Given the current political climate, the walkout of senior employees indicates a strong level of commitment to their editor and journalistic ideals. Says one staffer, “He [Yang Bin] asked us to be responsible, accurate, and true. He is a model for me and a man with high standards. I would hope that some day I could be like him.” One reporter goes even further: “‘We were happy with our paper and the idea we had. But now the editor is leaving and the idea will leave with him. I am very sad,’ said a journalist who spoke with foreign reporters despite the presence of security officials and a warning that she could lose her job.”⁴⁰

And the threat to her job—or worse—is very real. Zhou He writes that “coercion—in such forms as imprisonment, exile, purge and unemployment—has become the main means of safeguarding the supremacy of the Chinese version of Communist ideology. This is particularly true in the [CCP] media.”⁴¹ A good deal of evidence supports this view. According to Reporters sans Frontières, a French-



A Chinese man sorts through Chinese newspapers near a Friday edition of the *Beijing News* (front) at a newsstand in Beijing, China, December 30, 2005. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

based non-governmental organization, as of 2007 China had more journalists imprisoned than any other country and ranked 163d out of 169 countries rated on press freedom.⁴² Journalists who embarrass the central government often face its wrath. Whether demoted, fired, or imprisoned, their cases all exemplify Beijing’s coercion. As Frank Smyth, of the Committee to Protect Journalists, argues, “in today’s dynamic climate, the Communist Party has increasingly resorted to jailing journalists in order to silence some of the nation’s most enterprising reporters.”⁴³ In short, the Chinese government can and often does jail wayward journalists.

Although punishment of this sort was apparently not imposed in the *Beijing News* case, the threat was certainly there. Despite the immediate, physical presence of security officials, the very real media crackdown,⁴⁴ and the obvious illegality of going on strike, nearly 100 people chose to do so anyway, demonstrating that contention

can happen in the least likely places. And the fact that these reporters walked out to support both their editor and the principle of journalistic independence, at least to the small degree it had previously existed at the *Beijing News*, suggests something about the nature of grievance, a topic explored further below.

Chengdu Boycott. Moreover, and this may have great significance for the CPD, contentious behavior in the news media occasionally spreads across organizations. In September 2005, for example, all the papers in Chengdu, a major media market, joined in a boycott on press coverage of Chen Kaige's 2005 movie, *Wu Ji* (The Promise), despite pressure from higher authorities to give the movie favorable publicity.⁴⁵ This coordinated boycott appears to have been provoked both by outrage over restrictions on press coverage, such as the demand that "There will be no negative comments about 'The Promise',"⁴⁶ and anger that entertainment reporters were not given free screenings. Regardless of the reason, this show of solidarity in one of China's most competitive media markets was remarkable. As one observer writes, "The Chengdu newspaper business is extremely competitive. . . . Chengdu media have a fixed rule: . . . if one paper doesn't report, another one certainly will; if one media outlet refuses, another will give special coverage. But this time the silence on *The Promise* came through all media groups, and this is the first time the Chengdu media have united like this."⁴⁷ Their solidarity did not contradict any specific CPD directive or oppose any specific government policy, but it was one of the first times the Chinese press engaged in a "spontaneously self-organized rebellion to protest against restrictions on their coverage."⁴⁸

Recent Events. Finally, although these three incidents may be the most high-profile examples of action by contentious journalists, resistance has continued in the years since. For example, in early 2008 journalists erupted over an attempt by officials in northeastern Liaoning province to arrest reporter Zhu Wenna in Beijing because of his unflattering coverage of local officials in Xifeng County. Newspapers across China condemned the heavy-handed attempt at press control,⁴⁹ with *China Youth Daily* stating in an unsigned editorial that "once the comprehensive power mechanism springs into action, and public instruments are turned to the service of personal ends, they are lethal and oppressive, whether targeting media organs or individual reporters."⁵⁰ The media outrage ultimately forced the resignation of the county's party secretary.⁵¹

In recent years newspapers have also succeeded in get-

ting a highly unfavorable draft press law changed⁵² and in publicizing stories despite clear CCP disapproval.⁵³ There have also been tantalizing hints of media pushback in the wake of the devastating Sichuan earthquake of May 12, 2008. Meanwhile, the three major incidents examined here continue to echo through the media, with *China Youth Daily's* Li and Lu remaining prominent public figures, and many current and former reporters from the *Beijing News* continuing to meet once a year to commemorate their brief but meaningful strike.⁵⁴ In short, although no action since 2005 has been quite as dramatic as the three incidents detailed above, resistance continues in myriad forms even under a heavy-handed press crackdown.

The Theoretical Payoff

But why does this matter theoretically? Does the fact that some individual Chinese journalists or newspapers get rambunctious from time to time merely add a wrinkle to previous theories of contentious politics? Other than demonstrating that media groups do not always act at the behest of the state, what can this behavior tell us about contentious politics more generally? In fact, China's contentious journalists help shed fresh light on venerable theories and provide some testable new propositions at the same time.

First, this behavior suggests that the recent effort by the most prominent advocates of political process theory to revise its theoretical foundations by moving away from overly structural arguments is laudable. In its earlier incarnations, political process theory relied on "the conviction that most political movements and revolutions are set in motion by social changes that render the established political order more vulnerable or receptive to challenge," or, in other words, by changes in the "political opportunity structure."⁵⁵ Elements of the political opportunity structure include: "1. The relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system; 2. The stability of that broad set of elite arguments that typically undergird a polity; 3. The presence of elite allies, and 4. The state's capacity and propensity for repression."⁵⁶

Since purely structural approaches to political process theory can approach tautology—evidence for changes in the political opportunity structure is usually determined after an effective social movement has emerged—these scholars have begun to recognize the importance of the perceptions that mediate actors' interactions with the political opportunity structure. "Rather than look upon 'opportunities and threats' as objective structural factors," McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly increasingly "see them as

subject to attribution.”⁵⁷ The present article’s emphasis on individual acts of journalistic pushback itself falls into the “analysis of smaller-scale causal mechanisms” that these scholars have embraced.⁵⁸ And although they do not specifically mention grievances, they hint at their importance when they recognize the need to “explain how people who at a given point in time are not making contentious claims start doing so” and “what sorts of actors engage in contention.”⁵⁹

The cases presented here support the efforts of political process scholars to move away from a purely structuralist approach.⁶⁰ The strike of most of the *Beijing News* senior staff, for example, does not fit neatly into the original, unmodified political opportunity structure explanation. Of the four factors offered by McAdam et al., none demonstrate any objective changes that might encourage the emergence of a new, brief social movement. For example, even by strictly Chinese standards, the political system at the time of the strike was not especially open—especially for journalists. In addition, building on McAdam et al.’s enhanced allowance for the role of perception, it is clear that at least in the case of letter writers Li and Lu, the principal actors did not necessarily perceive an “objective” opening in the opportunity structure, but rather seem to have been motivated by exasperation more than by any sense of an improved possibility of success.⁶¹

It would be a stretch to claim there is any sort of “objective” opening in the Chinese media, which are currently experiencing a well-publicized crackdown on wayward newspapers,⁶² especially those that concentrate on political reporting.⁶³ The central government closed seventy-nine papers in 2005 as part of an ongoing effort to “severely crack down on illegal publications.”⁶⁴ And these trends have continued, with China’s ranking on the Reporters Sans Frontières Press Freedom Index dropping from 159th out of 167 rated countries in 2005 to 163rd out of 169 in 2007, moving past countries like Vietnam and Uzbekistan in press repression.⁶⁵

Meanwhile, Beijing has imposed increasingly onerous legal restrictions on the press. Regulations issued by the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) in late 2005,⁶⁶ for example, require that a newspaper’s publication permit be revoked if “the newspaper publication quality fail[s] to reach the prescribed standard over a long period of time,” or if it “fails to improve after being investigated and penalized.”⁶⁷ Neither the “prescribed standards” nor the “long period of time” are defined, and the vague wording of the new regulations is no accident. “With its power to determine—post hoc—what is appropriate media coverage, the CPD demarcates the

boundaries of the acceptable in such a deliberately fuzzy way that news workers self-censor to a critical degree.”⁶⁸ meaning that these and similar laws and regulations represent a narrowing of China’s political discourse. However, as the three examples of rebelliousness discussed in this article demonstrate, contentious action is possible even in these inauspicious circumstances—a conclusion that reinforces the importance of the recent movement of political process theory away from a purely structural explanation of contention and protest.

These results are broadly consistent with theories of news influence in sociology and communication studies, and they should prompt social scientists to look more closely at them. Bourdieu’s field theory provides a good start for this sort of analysis, for it recognizes that journalism is both a product of political and economic pressure on the one hand, and a push for independence on the other. “This struggle is inevitable,” one field theory scholar writes, for “the history of journalism could well be in large part the story of an impossible autonomy—or, to put it in the least pessimistic way, the unending story of an autonomy that must always be re-won because it is always threatened.”⁶⁹ But the Chinese context demonstrates that “possibilities for the autonomy of journalistic and other cultural fields”⁷⁰ do indeed exist, even in the most unlikely places. Although field theory and its applications to journalism were developed in a Western context, their congruencies with the Chinese case suggest that they might be a potent tool for moving beyond overly structural approaches. As such, field theory provides a potential way out of the no-man’s land between the trenches of liberal theory’s “theme of journalism as a countervailing force, a critical tool” and critical theory’s “opposing vision which sees journalism as a relay of the structure of oppression.”⁷¹

In a similar vein, these events should also orient researchers to the growing networks of formal and informal relationships (*guanxi*) that increasingly serve both as carriers of professional norms and as potential loci of journalistic autonomy. Journalists can strive for professionalism even in authoritarian contexts, with movements often based in organizations of reporters.⁷² As of 2008 there are at least three Beijing-based, domestically organized Chinese journalist organizations dedicated to improving environmental, legal, and cultural reporting, respectively.⁷³ Such organizations bring to mind Carsten Hermann-Pillath’s argument that *guanxi* is one of the critical drivers of Chinese cultural change, and that “there is an extremely lively world of newspapers and journals . . . in which sometimes highly original and unique problems are openly discussed.”⁷⁴

These webs of relationships even extend outside the borders of the People's Republic and into Greater China, as Curtin's recent *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience* highlights.⁷⁵ In short, both cases and theory point to the importance of formal and informal professional groupings as potential sites for resistance and autonomy. Such organizations are ripe for further research.

Toward a Synthetic Theory of Grievances?

The key questions, then, are: What motivated journalists to engage in contentious, collective action despite the absence of an obvious political opening? And why did their protests take the form they did? For preliminary answers, the literature on grievances and repertoires is helpful. The empirical evidence from these cases within the Chinese news media implies that grievances alone can often be enough to spark contentious action, although probably only when other criteria are also met. Evidence from the media and other cases suggests that grievances can inspire action when they are related to "disruption of the quotidian,"⁷⁶ have a clear personal target or targets, and potential actors can seize the moral or symbolic high ground, although these should be treated as preliminary conclusions.

Kahneman and Tversky discovered more than twenty-five years ago that people are generally much more sensitive to potential losses than to potential gains, and this loss aversion is a key insight of what they term "prospect theory."⁷⁷ While people are indeed motivated to action by the prospect of gains, they are more highly motivated to avoid losing what they already have, an insight Snow, et al. build upon with their theory of how social movements begin. "The kind of breakdown most likely to be associated with movement emergence," they argue, "is that which penetrates and disrupts, or threatens to disrupt, taken-for-granted, everyday routines and expectancies."⁷⁸ While journalists face constant oppression and challenges from superiors and the central government, low pay and social prestige, danger from irate targets of investigative stories, and an overwhelming desire to change jobs,⁷⁹ this sort of "everyday" pressure only rarely turns into contentious social action.

Even when journalists are threatened *en masse*, as with the current public media crackdown, they tend to merely grumble about it.⁸⁰ But when reporters at individual newspapers are threatened with a disruption of their everyday routine—as in the cases above—they are much more likely to react against the government. When Li Datong and Lu Yuegang wrote open letters to their bosses at *China Youth*

Daily, they and the colleagues who helped them were rebelling against changes in the day-to-day operations of the paper. The journalists and editors at the *Beijing News* who went on strike did so to protest the removal of their editor and sudden, heavy-handed interference by the CPD. Even the Sichuan newspapers that refused to publicize Chen Kaige's film *The Promise* were outraged by the film company's departure from normal publicity arrangements (and free movie screenings for the reporters). As Snow et al. argue, "it is not exploitation or deprivation per se that is unsettling to the peasant, but actual or threatened disruptions of the peasants' subsistence routines,"⁸¹ and the evidence from these media suggests that this analysis can be extended to the urban intelligentsia.

The disruption of daily life may be necessary to produce collective action but is not usually sufficient. Feng Chen, in an analysis of labor strikes at failing state-owned enterprises (SOEs), argues that the bankruptcy of an SOE was not by itself enough to induce worker ire in most cases: "The motivation [to strike] increases if they believe that their economic plight is exacerbated by managerial corruption at the workplace."⁸² In other words, the workers need a visible target. And Snow et al. agree, claiming that accidents tend to encourage collective action when they "can be attributed to human negligence and/or error rather than to natural forces or 'acts of God'."⁸³

Evidence from the Chinese news media supports this conclusion. Despite the fact that newspapers are often closed down, as were seventy-nine in 2005,⁸⁴ collective action by the reporters involved remains rare. In the incidents described above, there was always a specific target or targets that mobilized collective action. Both Li Datong and Lu Yuegang, for example, wrote letters directly to the party-appointed editor-in-chief to protest specific policies, and the Sichuan papers were responding directly and personally to restrictions imposed by Chen Kaige and his government backers. The *Beijing News* strike was slightly more complicated, but it fits the general pattern. The paper is a joint venture of the formerly bold Southern Daily News group and the staid (and central-government-run) *Guangming Daily* group, with the latter holding 51 percent of the total shares. *Guangming Daily's* controlling stake allowed it to order the replacement of Yang Bin and his staff with other *Guangming Daily* editors, thus providing an obvious target for the ire of striking reporters. While liberal editors are replaced all the time in the Chinese press, they are not usually replaced by representatives of the very organization that ordered their replacement in the first place. Thus, general "disruption of the quotidian"

or threatened subsistence routines are necessary but not usually sufficient—there often must be a concrete and easily visible target for collective action.

Finally, the availability of moral symbolism encourages contentious collective action by providing a frame for—and lending legitimacy to—the nascent movement. Hurst and O'Brien point to examples of protest without an obvious individual target, but their work highlights the importance of a moral element to inspire collective action.⁸⁵ In their study, pensioners raised in the Maoist context of proletarian dictatorship and the “iron rice bowl” believe their moral rights are violated when their pensions are not paid. The “radiant past” of the Mao years, both imagined and real, and the government’s own rhetoric give them easily employable symbolic weapons they can use to legitimate their protests. Similarly, collective action by the media often takes place in reference to a moral compass defined by the official views of the ruling CCP. In response to the announcement by *China Youth Daily* editor-in-chief Li Erliang that reporters’ wages would be tied to the political reception of their articles, Li Datong wrote:

The core of these regulations is that the standards for appraising the performance of the newspapers will not be on the basis of the media role according to Marxism. It is not based upon the basic principles of the Chinese Communist Party. It is not based upon the spirit of President Hu Jintao about how power, rights and sentiments should be tied to the people. It is not based upon whether the masses of readers will be satisfied. Instead, the appraisal standard will depend upon whether a small number of senior organizations or officials like it or not.⁸⁶

Li is criticizing the plan on the basis that it is opposed to Marxism and “the basic principles of the Chinese Communist Party.” In other words, it is immoral even in reference to the CCP’s own standards. Similarly, “The freedom of the press should be guaranteed as before. Pressure is unacceptable,” one striking *Beijing News* reporter was quoted as saying,⁸⁷ despite the obvious fact that in practice, freedom of the press has never been “guaranteed” in China.⁸⁸ Even newspapers involved in the Sichuanese refusal to publicize *The Promise* framed their claims to involve a moral component, portraying themselves as aggrieved parties unable to write truthful film reviews. Employing this type of language may be merely tactical and is not necessarily deployable in every circumstance. While “retirees’ protests in China display elements of moral economic resistance,”⁸⁹ such moral claims are not restricted to an urban underclass, and in fact seem to be a common feature of many Chinese collective action

incidents, arguably related to what Tilly and Tarrow call “standing claims.”⁹⁰

Conclusion

Previous scholarship on social movements in China has not only overlooked the media’s relationship to the emergence or development of such movements, but has also downplayed the extent to which journalists are sometimes themselves contentious actors. This revelation sheds empirical light on the phenomenon of China’s contentious reporters, and theoretical light on the renewed importance of grievances in studies of movement emergence. Results from the press and elsewhere suggest that collective action is most likely to arise when groups are faced with subsistence crises or “disruptions of the quotidian,” have a specific target or targets to blame, and are able to evoke a moral or symbolic claim as a legitimating factor.

But there is a great deal more to be learned from a marriage of Chinese media studies and social movement literature. For example, how does the potentially contentious nature of the press affect its coverage of other social movements? What strategies do nascent social movements apply to maximize press coverage without arousing the ire of the central government? What effect, if any, will further press commercialization and the inroads of the new electronic media have on traditional Chinese news sources? And what of the importance of formal and informal professional groups in spearheading journalistic autonomy? These questions and others have thus far received little attention in the social sciences; this gap should no longer be ignored.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Marlowe Hood, “The Use and Abuse of Mass Media by Chinese Leaders During the 1980s,” in *China’s Media, Media’s China*, ed. Chin-Chuan Lee (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 37–58; Lianjiang Li and Kevin O’Brien, “Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China,” *Modern China* 22, no. 1 (1996): 28–61; Yawei Liu, “Consequences of Villager Committee Elections in China: Better Local Governance or More Consolidation of State Power?” *China Perspectives*, no. 31 (2000): 19–35; Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

2. David A. Snow, Daniel M. Cress, Liam Downey, and Andrew W. Jones, “Disrupting the ‘Quotidian’: Reconceptualizing the Relationship Between Breakdown and the Emergence of Collective Action,” *Mobilization* 3, no. 1 (1998): 1–22.

3. Electronic media are unfortunately outside the scope of this article, but present fertile ground for future research.

4. See, for example, James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

5. For an influential work along these lines, see Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content* (New York: Longman, 1991).

6. For a systematic analysis of these sorts of aggressive newspaper articles

- in China, see Jonathan Hassid, "Poor and Content Is Rich: a Computer-Assisted Content Analysis of Selected Chinese Newspapers, 2004–2006" (paper presented at the ninth annual conference of the Hong Kong Sociological Association, Hong Kong, December 8, 2007). For an analysis of similar themes in Chinese blogs, see Jonathan Hassid, Elisa Oreglia, and Xiao Qiang, "Don't Let Sleeping Blogs Lie: A Computer-Assisted Content Analysis of Chinese Blogs" (paper presented at the University of San Francisco conference "Public Diplomacy, Counterpublics, and the Asia Pacific," San Francisco, April 18–20, 2007).
7. See, for example, Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, "Crazy Rabbits! Children's Media Culture," in *Media in China: Consumption, Content and Crisis*, ed. Stephanie Donald, Michael Keane, and Yin Hong (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002), pp. 128–38; Eric Kit-Wai Ma, "Rethinking Media Studies: The Case of China," in *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, ed. James Curran and Myung-Jin Park (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 21–34.
 8. Zhou He, "Chinese Communist Party Press in a Tug of War: A Political-Economy Analysis of the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily*," in *Power, Money, and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China*, ed. Chin-Chuan Lee (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), pp. 112–51.
 9. Ashley Esarey, assistant professor of political science, Middlebury College, personal communication, December 17, 2006.
 10. He Qinglian, *Media Control in China (Zhongguo Zhengfu Ruhe Kongzhi Meiti)* (New York and Hong Kong: Human Rights in China, 2004), p. 4.
 11. Chinese Academy of Social Sciences News Research Institute (Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Xinwen Yanjiusuo), *Zhongguo Xin Wen Nian Jian* (China Journalism Yearbook) (Beijing: Zhongguo Xin Wen Nian Jian She [China Journalism Yearbook Publishing], Various years).
 12. And this does not even take into account new electronic sources of news, from commercial Web sites to private blogs to cell phone SMS information services.
 13. Jing Wang, *Brand New China: Advertising, Media, and Commercial Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 1.
 14. Yuezhi Zhao, "From Commercialization to Conglomeration: The Transformation of the Chinese Press Within the Orbit of the Party State," *Journal of Communication* 50, no. 2 (2000): 3–26.
 15. The Chinese government changed the English translation several years ago from Central Propaganda Department. The Chinese name has not changed (Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui xuanchuanbu).
 16. E.g., Ching Cheong, the chief China correspondent for the Singaporean *Straits Times*. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4747613.stm>.
 17. Author interview with former Chinese reporter (Berkeley, California, 2005); interview with Chinese current editor (Shanghai, 2005); with Chinese current senior editor (Berkeley, 2005); with Chinese current senior editor (Berkeley, California, 2006); and with Chinese current senior reporter (Berkeley, California, 2006).
 18. Reporters Sans Frontières, "China: Annual Report" (2008), www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=736.
 19. Benjamin L. Liebman, "Watchdog or Demagogue? The Media in the Chinese Legal System," *Columbia Law Review* 105, no. 1 (2005): 8.
 20. Hood, "Use and Abuse of Mass Media by Chinese Leaders," p. 54.
 21. Qing Dai, *Yangtze! Yangtze!* ed. Patricia Adams and John Thibodeau, trans. Nancy Liu et al. (Toronto: Earthscan, 1994).
 22. News of some events, naturally, does circulate through official and unofficial channels, but the mechanisms for why some events are reported and others are suppressed remain underspecified. For more information on China's press control systems, see Ashley Esarey, "Speak No Evil: Mass Media Control in Contemporary China," in *A Freedom House Special Report* (New York: Freedom House, 2006); and Jonathan Hassid, "An Uncertain Business: Controlling the Chinese Media," *Asian Survey* 48, no. 3 (2008).
 23. Li and O'Brien, "Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China," p. 48.
 24. Lowell Dittmer, "The Politics of Publicity in Reform China," in *China's Media, Media's China*, ed. Chin-Chuan Lee (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).
 25. Ashley Esarey, personal communication, December 17, 2006.
 26. Martin Brendebach, "Public Opinion: A New Factor Influencing the PRC Press," *Asien, Deutsche Zeitschrift für Politik, Wirtschaft und Kultur*, no. 96 (2005), p. 37.
 27. O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, p. 95.
 28. Liu, "Consequences of Villager Committee Elections in China," p. 35.
 29. Charles Tilly and Sidney G. Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2007), p. 197.
 30. During the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement, for example, journalists marched for fewer press restrictions. See Allison Liu Jernow and Anne F. Thurston, "*Don't Force Us to Lie*": *The Struggle of Chinese Journalists in the Reform Era* (New York: Committee to Protect Journalists, 1993).
 31. This was, in itself, a clear-cut and rather ham-handed effort to control a newspaper with a history of relative journalistic independence. See Hassid, "Uncertain Business."
 32. Datong Li, "Jiu Zhongguo qingnian bao xin de kaoping banfa zhi Li Erliang zongbianji de xin" (A Letter to Editor-in-Chief Li Erliang on the New Methods for Evaluation at *China Youth Daily*), August 9, 2005; English translation available at www.zonaeuropa.com/20050817_2.htm, accessed June 7, 2008.
 33. Yuegang Lu, "Zhi Zhongguo gongchanzhuyi qingnian tuan zhongyang shujichu changwu shuji Zhao Yong de gongkai xin" (An Open Letter to Zhao Yong, Secretary of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Youth League), August 3, 2004; available at www.zonaeuropa.com/20040725_2.htm, accessed June 7, 2008; author's translation.
 34. Philip P. Pan, "The Click That Broke a Government's Grip," *Washington Post* (February 19, 2006): A1.
 35. Although this is not to imply that support for the two editors was universal at the paper, according to one interviewee (Author interview with Chinese current senior editor [Beijing, 2008]).
 36. Author interviews with Chinese current deputy editor (Beijing, 2005) and Chinese former senior editor (Beijing, 2007).
 37. See Richard Spencer, "Protest Editor Sent to 'Research Room,'" *Telegraph* (February 27, 2006). This is also a closure that demonstrates the reach of the media crackdown, happening to well-known, well-connected journalists on a paper with more than its fair share of politically prominent backers.
 38. Chris Gill, "Beijing Paper's Staff Strike after Editor's Removal," *Guardian* (December 31, 2005), www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,1675736,00.html, accessed January 1, 2006.
 39. Roland Soong, *Eastsouthwestnorth* [blog] (2005), www.zonaeuropa.com/200512brief.htm.
 40. Robert Marquand, "China Ratchets Up Control on Expression," *Christian Science Monitor* (January 3, 2006), www.csmonitor.com/2006/0103/p06s01-woap.html, accessed January 3, 2006.
 41. Zhou He, "How Do the Chinese Media Reduce Organizational Incongruence? Bureaucratic Capitalism in the Name of Communism," in *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, ed. Chin-Chuan Lee (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 208.
 42. Reporters Sans Frontières, *Worldwide Press Freedom Index* (2007), www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=24025.
 43. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "Hearing on China's State Control Methods and Mechanisms, April 14, 2005," ed. 109th Congress, 1st sess. (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005), p. 92.
 44. See Nicholas Kristof, "A Clampdown in China," *New York Times* (May 17, 2005), www.nytimes.com/2005/05/17/opinion/17kristoff.html?hp, accessed May 17, 2005.
 45. This was not the only negative publicity surrounding *The Promise*, which was famously parodied on the Internet by He Ge as *The Killing Over a Bun*.
 46. Lei Yuan, "Buxu meiti fujian baodao Chengdu meiti fengsha" (Not Allowed to Report Critical Views, Media in Chengdu Suppress Coverage of *The Promise*), *Jiangnan Shibao* (October 28, 2005).
 47. Ibid.
 48. Soong, *Eastsouthwestnorth*.
 49. Edward Cody, "Move to Arrest Journalist Sparks Backlash in China: County Officials Brought Police to Beijing After Report Critical of Their Party Secretary," *Washington Post* (January 9, 2008), www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/08/AR2008010802168_pf.html, accessed March 25, 2008.

50. Quoted in David Bandurski, "‘Public Opinion Will Not Lose’: Chinese Media Heat Up over the Attempted Arrest of a Reporter in Beijing" (China Media Project, 2008), <http://cmp.hku.hk/2008/01/08/811/>, accessed March 25, 2008

51. "Chinese County Party Chief Must Resign After Retaliation Against Reporter." *People's Daily* (English ed.) (February 6, 2008): A11.

52. David Bandurski, "China's Emergency Response Law Quietly Takes the Stage, Targets 'Fake Information'" (China Media Project, 2007), <http://cmp.hku.hk/2007/09/03/602/>, accessed March 25, 2008.

53. For example, the Chongqing "nail house" story, where a couple who refused to sell their land to developers became a media cause célèbre. See Zhang Rui, "The Inside Investigation of the Chongqing 'Nail House'" (Chongqing "Dingzihu" Shijian Neimu Diaocha), *Nanfang Zhoumo* (Southern Weekend) (March 29, 2007).

54. Author interview with Chinese current reporter (Beijing, 2008).

55. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, "Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes—Toward a Synthetic, Comparative Perspective on Social Movements," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 8.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

57. Doug McAdam, Sidney G. Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 43.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

60. Though naturally these cases neither represent nor are intended to represent the same sort of thoroughgoing quantitative review that characterizes most of the early political-process scholarship.

61. Author interview with Chinese former senior editor (Beijing, 2005). This interviewee has personal knowledge of the events in question.

62. See Philip P. Pan, "Leading Publication Shut Down in China: Party's Move Is Part of Wider Crackdown," *Washington Post* (January 25, 2006): A15; Kristof, "Clampdown in China."

63. Author interviews with Chinese current senior editor (Berkeley, 2005), Chinese former reporter (Berkeley, 2006), and Chinese current senior reporter (Berkeley, 2007).

64. "79 Newspapers Fall Victim to Cultural Crackdown," *South China Morning Post* (January 19, 2006).

65. Reporters Sans Frontières, *Worldwide Press Freedom Index*, www.rsf.org/article.php?id_article=24025, accessed June 7, 2008.

66. Article 53, paragraphs (2) and (1), respectively, of the Regulations for the Administration of Newspaper Publication promulgated by the GAPP on September 30, 2005, as Decree No. 32. The GAPP is the parallel state equivalent to the Party's CPD, although with slightly different responsibilities. As an official state organ, it can issue binding regulations.

67. Jesse T.H. Chang, Isabelle I.H. Wan, and Philip Qu, ed., *China's Media and Entertainment Law*, vol. 2 (Hong Kong: TransAsia, 2006), p. 459.

68. Hassid, "Uncertain Business," p. 3.

69. Patrick Champagne, "The 'Double Dependency': The Journalistic Field Between Politics and Markets," in *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, ed. Rodney Dean Benson and Erik Neveu (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2005), p. 50.

70. Rodney Dean Benson and Erik Neveu, "Introduction: Field Theory as a Work in Progress," in *ibid.*, p. 10.

71. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field," in *ibid.*, p. 42.

72. See, e.g., Jane Leftwich Curry, *Poland's Journalists: Professionalism and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). The Mexican press also has some broadly analogous areas. See Chappell H. Lawson, *Building the Fourth Estate: Democratization and the Rise of a Free Press in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

73. Environmental group—personal observation and Wang Yongchen and Xiong Zhihong, eds., *Lü se Jizhe Shalong* (Green Journalists' Salon) (Beijing: Zhongguo huanjing kexue chubanshe [China Environmental Science Publishers], 2005). Legal group—personal observation. Cultural group—Author interview with Chinese current reporter (Beijing, 2007). There is also at least one general purpose group in Guangzhou, according to an author's interview with a Chinese current senior editor (Guangzhou, 2008).

74. Carsten Herrmann-Pillath, "Cultural Species and Institutional Change in China," *Journal of Economic Issues* 40, no. 3 (2006): 539–74.

75. Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), esp. chap. 6.

76. Snow et al., "Disrupting the 'Quotidian'."

77. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk," *Econometrica: Journal of the Econometric Society* 47, no. 2 (1979): 263–91.

78. Snow et al., "Disrupting the 'Quotidian'," p. 2.

79. Zhuoqiong Wang, "Four in Five Reporters Want to Change Jobs," *China Daily* (November 8, 2005).

80. For example, one Chinese current senior editor in an interview with the author (Berkeley, 2005) asserted that the large majority of Chinese journalists "hate" [hen] the Hu Jintao administration. Few act publicly, however.

81. Snow et al., "Disrupting the 'Quotidian'," p. 10.

82. Feng Chen, "Subsistence Crises, Managerial Corruption and Labour Protests in China," *China Journal*, no. 44 (2000): 42.

83. Snow et al., "Disrupting the 'Quotidian'," p. 7.

84. "79 Newspapers Fall Victim to Cultural Crackdown."

85. William Hurst and Kevin O'Brien, "China's Contentious Pensioners," *China Quarterly*, no. 170 (2002): 345–60.

86. Li, "Letter to Editor-in-Chief Li Erliang."

87. Yahoo! News, via Kodo News at <http://asia.news.yahoo.com/051229/kyodo/d8eq4a6g4.html>.

88. Technically, Chapter 2, Article 35 of the Chinese Constitution guarantees freedom of the press, but in practice this is universally ignored.

89. Hurst and O'Brien, "China's Contentious Pensioners," p. 360.

90. Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, p. 82. These are claims that "say the actor belongs to an established category within the regime and therefore deserves the rights and respect that members of that category receive" (p. 190). Finally, the mini-examples presented of the press outrage against the Liaoning party boss who tried to arrest the Beijing reporter or the press hoopla against the Chongqing "nail house" developers also fit the patterns presented here, although space constraints prevent a fuller discussion (see n. 53).

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