

**Title of Article**

Freeing the Press: How Field Environment Explains Critical News Reporting in China

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**Abstract**

This article examines critical news reporting in China as an instance of collective resistance in authoritarian contexts. It draws on field theory to understand why and how news media in certain localities were able to resist political pressure and report critically on important social problems, despite limited media freedom. Through a comparative study of six newspaper organizations in the three coastal cities of Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai, the article demonstrates the significance of local field environment for critical news reporting. The findings reveal how site-specific field environments can alternately enable or constrain collective resistance in an authoritarian context. In localities where the journalist communities were paired with a competitive newspaper market and less unified state agencies, the field environment allowed journalists to produce critical news reports. But when the local political and economic fields were less fragmented and competitive, respectively, the opposite was true.

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**Biographical Information**

Ya-Wen Lei is a Junior Fellow at the Harvard Society of Fellows. She received her JSD from Yale Law School in 2011 and her PhD in sociology from the University of Michigan in 2013. She will begin her appointment as an assistant professor in Harvard's Department of Sociology in July 2016.

Although sustainable social movements remain rare in authoritarian China, a variety of collective rightful resistance has been on the rise among peasants, workers, and members of the middle class. Rightful resisters take advantage of political opportunities created by government structure and institutions, mobilizing the law to pursue their own agendas (Chen 2012; Lee 2007; O'Brien and Li 2006). Most collective resistance of this kind targets the realm of policy implementation. Resisters demand that the Chinese state deliver on its promises with regard to law and policy, but they seldom refer to constitutional principles, demand broader civil and political rights, or challenge the legitimacy of existing laws and policies (O'Brien and Li 2006, 60, 122). Resisters also limit their criticism to local levels of government only and avoid questioning the central government (Lee 2007, 8–9; O'Brien and Li 2006).

Existing studies deepen our understanding of collective resistance in authoritarian contexts where institutions that allow competitive elections and socio-political organizations function weakly; nevertheless, two aspects of collective resistance remain to be studied. First, as O'Brien and Li (2006, 114) point out, little research has examined regional variation in terms of collective resistance in a national context. This undermines our ability to unpack and specify political opportunities for collective resistance (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 1996; Tarrow 1994). Second, few studies have examined more boundary-pushing forms of collective resistance. Whereas most collective resistance focuses on implementation of specific laws and policies, broader claims are made by some Chinese resisters, such as dissidents, intellectuals (Goldman 2005; O'Brien and Li 2006, 60) and journalists (Zhao and Lin 2008). Zhao and Lin (2008) call attention to the democratic role of Chinese media and contend that the development of Chinese media constitutes, in itself, a form of social movement. Experience in Poland's

democratization also suggests the importance of studying the role of journalists in collective resistance (Curry 1990). The above gap in existing literature motivates this study of critical reporting (or the lack thereof) across newspapers in three cities in China.

In normative theories of democracy, the news media are expected to produce critical news reports—reports that identify fundamental societal problems, analyze their causes, and search for solutions—because such reports facilitate an effective public sphere and critical political culture (Habermas 1989, 1996).<sup>1</sup> In reality, however, a gap often exists between the news media’s normative role and its actual practices. Even in advanced democracies where freedom of speech and freedom of the press are protected, media practices are often unduly influenced by political and economic power and not always focused on reporting on critical social problems (Bourdieu 2001; Habermas 1989; Mills 1956). Not surprisingly, this situation is exacerbated in authoritarian contexts, where it takes concerted effort for media to overcome political control. Here, simply pointing out the systematic roots of a problem is often considered to be threatening and oppositional to the state. Faced with censorship and other forms of political control, media professionals in authoritarian contexts take huge risks even attempting to discuss certain social problems, let alone when they explicitly criticize the government. As such, critical news reporting is often considered by journalists to constitute, itself, a form of collective resistance against political control (Cain 2013; Waisbord 2000).

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<sup>1</sup> The news media are expected not only to uncover problems, but also to help the public analyze those problems and come up with solutions. These practices are broader than what is conventionally referred to as “watchdog journalism,” as the latter only focuses on fact-finding, especially facts regarding illegal practices.

China exemplifies an authoritarian country with unfavorable conditions for critical news reporting. It is consistently ranked as one of the countries with the least freedom of press by Reporters Without Borders, coming in as the sixth and seventh worst out of 179 countries in 2012 and 2013, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Given the Chinese state's pervasive censorship, critical news reporting is often discouraged, if not completely suppressed. After the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, the government restricted reports that referred to systematic problems in the country, as Chinese leaders argued that such news was to blame for sparking the Tiananmen protests and threatening the Party-state's legitimacy. In addition to denouncing such "negative" reports, the Chinese state strengthened its request for "positive propaganda," telling journalists to focus only on the achievements of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As part of the state apparatus, news media have been required to propagate official ideology and agendas; their role, from the perspective of the government, is to produce obedient subjects, rather than critical citizens. Furthermore, similar to their counterparts in liberal democracies, Chinese media are subjected to economic pressures as well. Scholars find that economic power has corrupted the country's news content. Businesses can use money to forestall unfavorable stories and obtain favorable coverage instead (Zhao 1998, 2000b). Thus, Chinese media are described as remaining "aloof to the democratic impulse in the society" (Pan 2010, 185) and attempting to "avoid a critical interrogation of the broader social and economic structure" (Zhao 2004, 63).

Yet, despite these overwhelming pressures, as Zhao and Lin (2008) point out, some Chinese news media do manage to resist state control to produce critical news reports—

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<sup>2</sup> Reporters without Borders, "World Report – China," <http://en.rsf.org/report-china,57.html> (accessed April 10, 2013).

sometimes provoking, in turn, a government crackdown (Qian 2008). Such reporting is still relatively infrequent, however, and unevenly distributed within the country, prompting the empirical question that this article aims to address: Why and how are some media in certain localities in China able to resist pressure and produce more critical news reports? Answering this empirical question can help us to understand a critical form of collective resistance in authoritarian contexts.

So far, there have been only limited efforts to examine how and why Chinese news media differ with regards to critical news reporting. This relative paucity of research can be attributed, in part, to the fact that media resistance in China sits awkwardly in relation to the dominant approach to social movements and contentious politics (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 2011; Tilly 1978). As Armstrong and Berstein (2008) point out, the dominant approach to social movements and contentious politics does not consider that institutional insiders, such as actors within the state, for example, can be challengers in contentious politics and social movements. Such assumptions about the relevant actors of movements and contentious politics tend to direct attention to the resistance of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other non-state actors, and away from the resistance of actors within authoritarian states, such as the news media in China.

Although a few studies do examine Chinese news media's reporting practices under political pressure, their findings cannot sufficiently address why Chinese news media differ with regards to critical news reporting. Zhao and Lin (2008) describe and explain the involvement of Chinese media in social movements through critical news reporting, but their comparative analysis of Western and Chinese media does little to investigate heterogeneity among the

Chinese media or the concrete conditions and mechanisms that allow political resistance. Other studies point out the existence of two exceptional Chinese news media famous for investigative practices: China Central Television (CCTV), the national state television broadcaster; and the *Southern Weekly*, a weekly newspaper based in Guangdong (Pan 2010; Zhao 2000b, 2004). These studies suggest that since these two particular news media are or were sheltered by certain government agencies, they have the privilege of conducting investigative reports. Moreover, it is argued that their reports individualize and localize problems without exploring their roots too deeply (Pan 2010). As such, the two forums avoid criticizing the central leadership in any way. As these findings are not consistent with Zhao and Lin (2008)'s observations, the question of whether Chinese news media are totally silent on fundamental problems remains contested. In addition, we still know little about how micro-level media resistance is enabled and constrained by structural conditions. Furthermore, with a paucity of data about news media other than CCTV and the *Southern Weekly*, it is difficult to examine and explain differences among news media. These limitations make clear the need for further examination of critical news reporting in China. This article begins to fill this gap with a comparative study of six newspaper organizations in three localities in coastal China in the mid-2000s.

The study examines newspapers rather than other media as newspapers play a crucial role in critical reporting. Despite the existence of other media and various technological advances favoring competing forms, newspapers remain an important source for citizens to access information and analysis about social problems in China. As print media, newspapers have more space to analyze societal problems and discuss solutions in depth than do television and radio forums. Newspaper reports are also widely disseminated on the Internet. And while the process

of “printing” newspapers has increasingly moved online, the ongoing popularity of news sites in China speaks to the continued demand for text-based coverage.<sup>3</sup>

I build upon Fligstein and McAdam’s field theory (2011, 2012), particularly the concept of field environment, to examine why and how news media in certain localities in China were able to resist political pressure and report critically on important social problems, despite the limited freedom afforded by an authoritarian state. Through a comparative study of six newspaper organizations in the three coastal cities of Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai, I demonstrate the significance of local field environment—the ways in which the journalistic field was embedded in the market and state fields—for critical news reporting. In the following sections, I first develop a theoretical framework to study critical news reporting. Next, I consider case selection and data analysis strategy. Then, I present the results of my empirical analysis. In the last section, I summarize the research findings and discuss their contribution to the existing literature.

## **A FIELD ANALYSIS OF CRITICAL NEWS REPORTING**

### **The Conventional Framework of News Production**

The conventional framework of news production locates journalist communities in between the market and the state. It suggests that external market and state forces impinge upon journalistic autonomy, thus adversely influencing news production. As such, journalists are

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<sup>3</sup> For Chinese Internet users, a major source of news is from Internet portals—companies like Yahoo in the United States. As Internet portals are not legally permitted to produce news themselves regarding political, social, and economic issues, they rely instead on newspapers to provide their news content.

situated in a precarious situation of “double dependency” (Champagne 2005). As members of a professional community, journalists are subject to professional norms and vie for recognition from peers. But at the same time, journalists also need to consider media organizations’ market profits and the state’s political power. Market and political logics often compete with professional logics and constitute obstacles to critical news reporting (Benson and Saguy 2005; Bourdieu 2005; Champagne 2005; Habermas 1989, 2006; Zhao 1998). Even though news organizations with distinct target readerships produce different kinds of news reports, attempts to maximize readership and allure advertisers often lead to sensational and entertainment-focused reports that sacrifice critical quality (Bourdieu 2001). Similar to market logics, political logics also impact journalists’ professional autonomy. Consideration of public funding and state regulations can dampen critical inquiry. Concerning the negative impact of political and market forces, studies of media and the public sphere tend to consider the market and the state as impediments to journalistic autonomy and accuse a co-opted media of contributing to politically alienated citizens, depoliticized public communication, and the degeneration of the public sphere (Boggs 1997; Bourdieu 2001; Habermas 1989; Thompson 1995, 240).

This conventional framework of news production offers useful insights. It correctly points out, for example, that professional, market, and political logics interact to shape news production. Nonetheless, the framework is insufficient in two respects. First, it pays little attention to the heterogeneous effect of market and state forces and thus provides limited guidance to explain such heterogeneity. As Benson (2006) points out, the state is not always detrimental to the autonomy of journalists. Public funding can, to a certain extent, mitigate the negative influence of market forces. Scholars also expect that market forces could counteract the



monopolistic power of the authoritarian state (Curran 1991, 48; Keane 1991, 152–53). These examples suggest that a more flexible theoretical framework for analyzing news production should take into account the plural ways in which professional, market, and political logics interact. Second, with its focus on the interaction between journalists, the market, and the state, the conventional framework implicitly assumes the irrelevance or insignificance of other institutions and actors on news production. However, research suggests that news organizations interact with actors beyond the state and market, such as civil society and social movement organizations, and that these interactions can sometimes counter the forces of the state and market to influence news production (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). Owing to these insufficiencies, the conventional framework is especially weak in terms of locating those opportunities that allow journalists to resist the adverse influence of market and political forces.

### **How Field Environment Shapes Critical News Reporting**

Fligstein and McAdam's (2011, 2012) field theory provides an excellent starting point to strengthen the conventional framework of news reporting. Fligstein and McAdam conceptualize a field as a meso-level social order where actors interact with one another based on a set of common understandings regarding the purposes of the field, the relationships between actors, and the rules in the field. In the case of news production, although journalists have to contend with both political and market forces, they do have a certain degree of professional autonomy (Benson 2006; Daniel 1996). This is true even in China, where the professional community of journalists shares a certain understanding of the ideals, rules, and practices of journalism—an understanding that, in many ways, deviates from the expectations of the Chinese state (Hassid 2011; Pan and Lu 2003). Accordingly, journalists constitute a journalistic field.

### *Field Environment of the Journalistic Field*

The notion of field environment in Fligstein and McAdam's field theory nicely complements the conventional framework of news production. Fligstein and McAdam (2012, 59) point out that, unlike other versions of field theory, their theory highlights the importance of the broader field environment or the embeddedness of a field. According to them, a given field does not exist in a vacuum but is always embedded in a broader field environment—a complex web of other fields linked to the given field through shared ties. These myriad ties impose constraints and provide opportunities for the actors in the field in question. As such, unpacking the variable ways in which a field is linked to the broader field environment helps to reveal the dynamics, change, and stability within that field. Theorizing the complexity of the field environment also avoids the pitfall of seeing fields as unified entities. Fligstein and McAdam's theory thus supports the strategy of analyzing the variable structure of the market and state fields, as well as their relationship with the journalistic field.

Research investigating newspaper markets suggests that market structure, especially level of market competition, moderates the effect of market forces on news production. Market competition measures the number of newspapers with reference to population in a designated market (Dunaway 2008). Research finds that, when a news market is less competitive, market actors do not have to closely monitor one another in order to survive (Sparrow 1999). Several studies also confirm that the level of competition within a news market influences news coverage (Benson 2006, Dunaway 2008). To be sure, in this situation, whether market logics align with or contradict professional and political logics is still case-dependent, but the level of competition of a news market can decrease the possibility that media organizations can afford to ignore other

actors, particularly readers and journalists. Accordingly, the ability of journalists and readers to influence news production should increase when a news market is more competitive.

Finally, the fragmented authoritarianism model of Chinese politics provides insights into how the journalistic field is influenced by that of the state. Instead of seeing the state as a monolithic entity, the fragmented authoritarianism model highlights that government agencies across levels and localities may have different interests and political goals. The complex and sometimes conflicting relationships between government agencies shapes bargaining and negotiation between levels and can influence policy implementation (Lieberthal 1992). It is not uncommon for the central government, for example, to encounter problems when asking local governments to implement its policies. As such, research in this area sees the fragmented nature of China's political regime as a weakness of the state. This fragmented political environment also opens up a space for policy entrepreneurs, such as peripheral local government officials, media, and non-government organizations, to participate in and influence policy making (Mertha 2009). The fragmented authoritarianism model thus suggests that journalists are more likely to resist the regulatory power of the state when the state field itself is fragmented. The above literatures on market structure and fragmented authoritarianism can be synthesized with Fligstein and McAdam's (2011, 2012) field theory. They help us to analyze how the configuration of market and state fields shapes news production. Taken together, the two literatures suggest that a more porous local environment—one characterized by politically fragmented and economically competitive local conditions—provides more opportunities for critical news reporting.

*The Legal Field as a Potential Proximate Field of the Journalistic Field*

Another insight provided by Fligstein and McAdam's (2011) field theory is the distinction between proximate and distant fields. Proximate fields have recurring ties with a given field and thus routinely impact it. In contrast, distant fields lack recurring ties with a given field and thus have virtually no capacity to influence it. I add to Fligstein and McAdam by noting that whether fields are proximate or distant is not constant, but rather can change across time and space. As Evans and Kay's research (2008) on field overlap demonstrates, capable agents can actively establish ties with an originally unconnected field in order to utilize the resources afforded by that field. In the process, a distant field becomes proximate, changing the broader field environment and the odds of successful contention. Attention to the potentially changing relationship between fields is thus important in order to avoid falsely assuming the irrelevance or insignificance of one field for another.

Building upon these studies of field overlap (Edelman, Leachman and McAdam 2010; Evans and Kay 2008) and field environment (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012), I further argue that a distant field can become proximate to a given field through two kinds of often complementary mechanisms—institutional and network mechanisms—and that this process is conditioned by the broader field environment of the field in question. Institutional mechanisms can change the relationship between fields by redefining resources and relevant players (Bourdieu 1994). Network mechanisms can also shape the interrelationship of fields. Actors in one field can access and employ material and symbolic resource in other fields by forming and using social networks. The formation of social networks that bridge fields is often a selection process: actors tend to seek complementary partners that share similar goals, views, or opponents

(Jensen 2004). Importantly, although literature on field overlap highlights the possibility of agents strategically utilizing institutional and social network mechanisms to connect to other fields, Fligstein and McAdam's (2011) field theory suggests that the broader field environment still influences such endeavors. Accordingly, analysis of the changing relationship between originally disconnected fields should consider how this dynamic process is still constrained and enabled by the broader field environment.

The conventional framework of news production only considers the influence of market and the state fields on news reporting, but I argue that the legal field is likely to become a proximate field of the journalistic field as the former can provide journalists with critical resources for news reporting. In the legal field, the main actors are legal professionals, particularly lawyers and legal scholars, and the main agenda is the interpretation and application of law (Edelman, Leachman and McAdam 2010). Legal professionals are also closely monitored by the Chinese state, but like media professionals, legal professionals have a certain level of autonomy and their own norms (Peerenboom 2002, 343).

The potential importance of law to critical news reporting derives from law's institutional nature as a symbolic resource both of and against the state's power. Using codified law to govern is a quintessential example of symbolic domination, through which the state imposes a common set of coercive norms (Bourdieu 1987, 1994). But, importantly, symbolic domination is not without cost. The dilemma facing the state is that it cannot reap the benefits of symbolic domination without at least appearing to subject itself to the same symbolic order of law (Bourdieu 1987, 1994). Furthermore, the state does not have complete control over how other

actors interpret and employ the law. Law's characteristic as a plastic cultural medium allows actors to develop alternative discourses and forms of political contention. Indeed, existing studies show that when an authoritarian state begins to use law to govern the populace, citizens respond by learning how to mobilize law to negotiate and contend with the state (Lee 2007; O'Brien and Li 2006).

The relevance of law to critical news reporting also partly derives from the institutional characteristic of law as a common medium to discuss a variety of issues in society. As Habermas (1996, 353–54) points out, law is a critical institution that facilitates the operation of the public sphere and the integration of society. It serves as a common language for citizens to identify and talk about problems across different spheres of life. Discussions of social problems and solutions, in turn, often produce contention over the interpretation and application of legal texts and principles. As critical reports aim to address societal problems and law is a common language for discussing these problems, the journalistic and legal fields are closely related.

Despite the potential importance of law to critical news reporting, it is difficult for journalists to utilize this recourse without assistance from legal professionals. Ultimately, interpreting and applying law requires high-level legal knowledge and expertise. Indeed, legal professionals are the only actors who have the state-acknowledged credentials to undertake this task. Therefore, journalists have to establish recurring ties with legal professionals in order to mobilize law effectively. Fligstein and McAdam's (2011) field theory suggests that whether or not actors in the field of journalism will be able to build such ties is influenced by the field's broader environment. When the journalistic field is embedded in a more politically fragmented

and economically competitive field environment, journalists will be more likely to succeed at building ties with the legal field and this will, in turn, facilitate their ability to produce critical news reports. But when the local political and economic fields are less fragmented and competitive, respectively, the opposite will be true.

## **CASE SELECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY**

### **Case Selection**

In order to investigate how local field environment influenced critical news reporting in China, I selected comparable newspaper organizations situated in different local conditions. Case selection was based on analysis of secondary literature and 38 preliminary interviews with journalists and scholars knowledgeable about the Chinese press. I conducted these preliminary interviews between 2009–2010 in China and the United States. There were three stages to the case selection process. First, I chose to study China's coastal urban region. China is a huge country with spatially heterogeneous economies. As the level of economic development in the urban coastal region is relatively homogenous, I decided to focus on the coastal region to control for this element. Readers in areas with different levels of economic development could arguably have distinct demands with regard to news content that would, in turn, further impact news production. Focusing on newspaper organizations in areas with relatively comparable economic development makes the task of comparison more viable.

Second, I selected the three coastal region cities of Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou because the local field environment varies across these three sites. Guangzhou has a much more competitive local newspaper market than Beijing and Shanghai (Huang and Zeng 2011; Liu

2010) (please see online *Methodological Appendix* for detailed explanation). State agencies in Guangzhou and Beijing are also more structurally fragmented than their counterparts in Shanghai due to the coexistence of multi-level Party-state agencies (Huang and Zeng 2011; Lee, He and Huang 2007). As such, the way in which the journalistic field is situated in relation to state agencies and the newspaper market varies across the three sites. These variations, summarized in Table 1, allow me to tease out the relationships between local environment of the journalistic field and critical news reporting.

[Table 1]

Third and finally, I selected six comparable newspaper organizations. I focused on local, commercially oriented, non-specialized newspapers that attempt to attract urban readers in the three cities. I first excluded non-comparable newspaper organizations from the selection pool, specifically, local newspapers with cross-regional backgrounds. The Chinese state generally prohibits cross-regional collaboration between newspaper organizations to contain their political influence, but the government has allowed a few newspapers to engage in cross-regional collaboration—for example, the *Beijing News (xinjingbao)* and the *Oriental Morning Post (dongfang zaobao)*. Different from ordinary local newspapers, local newspapers with a cross-regional background are operated by newspaper organizations in two localities and thus supervised by local governments in two places. As local newspapers with cross-regional backgrounds are embedded in an exceptionally complicated field environment, they are not comparable to ordinary local newspapers. After excluding non-comparable newspapers, I randomly chose two newspapers from the pool in each city. In each of the three cities, there are



around four to six comparable local newspapers. Due to limited resources in terms of data collection and analysis, I decided to select two local newspapers for each city. The selection process was also restricted by the availability of data as not every local newspaper was included in WiseNews, a professional digital news archive. The six selected newspaper organizations are listed in Table 2.

[Table 2]

### **Data Analysis Strategy**

#### *Data Sources*

My two primary data sources are news reports and in-depth interviews. News reports published by the six selected local newspapers and the *People's Daily* between 2003 and 2006 provide the first source of data for this study. In addition to the six selected local newspapers, I also analyzed the reports of the *People's Daily*. As the central Party-state's official newspaper, the *People's Daily's* serves as the yardstick of official discourse. Analysis of its content helps to understand how critical reports depart from official discourse. I decided to analyze news reports produced between 2003 and 2006 because both the journalistic and legal fields were already highly developed and remained stable during this period. Additionally, the influence of the Internet and social media on news production was still limited at this stage, so there was less concern about their potential impact.

The second data source for this study is 91 in-depth interviews. I conducted two waves of interviews. The first-wave consists of 38 preliminary face-to-face interviews with 28 journalists

and 10 scholars knowledgeable about the Chinese press, conducted between 2009 and 2010 in China and the United States. After I selected specific newspaper organizations, I conducted the second-wave interviews between 2011 and 2014 with four groups: Chinese journalists who work or have worked in the selected newspaper organizations; lawyers and legal scholars; communication studies scholars; and propaganda officials. The distribution of these subjects is provided in Table 3. I conducted face-to-face interviews in Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai. I also conducted phone interviews with some journalists working in Shanghai. Each second-wave interview lasted about two hours.

[Table 3]

### *Two-part Empirical Analysis*

The first part of the empirical analysis establishes the level of variation among the selected local newspapers in the three cities in terms of critical news reporting. In order to determine what constitutes critical news reports, I inductively developed a six-dimensional scheme based on the in-depth interviews with journalists. I asked subjects to name five important societal problems that journalists should report on if there is no pressure. I combined similar responses into categories and then selected the categories that were mentioned by at least 40% of the subjects, as 40% reflected a relatively high level of consensus. Their answers are captured as six categories listed in Table 4. I document the details of this process in the online

*Methodological Appendix.*

[Table 4]

I briefly explain the six dimensions below. The first dimension is *unconstitutionality*. Since the government wants citizens to comply with laws unconditionally, news reports that allude to unconstitutionality remind readers of the danger of taking law's legitimacy for granted. The second dimension examines the *state's infringement of rights*. There was a consensus among my interviewees that many serious problems in China are caused by government infringement of citizen rights. This dimension looks at the extent to which newspapers point out when government agencies are, in fact, the cause of societal problems. The third dimension examines *judicial independence*, which is the notion that the judiciary must be separate from other institutions of government. Many interviewees considered judicial independence to be the most fundamental problem in China's judicial system. The fourth dimension looks at *civil society and political participation*. Over half of my interviewees argued that many societal problems in China are caused by citizens' lack of *de facto* political rights to oversee the Party-state and participate in politics. They identified broadening civil society and citizen's rights to political participation as key to addressing fundamental societal problems. The fifth dimension investigates the *rights of disadvantaged groups*. Increasing inequality is a serious problem in China, occurring in every critical aspect of life. News items that frame such inequality in terms of the rights of disadvantaged groups, instead of as individual anecdotes, represent an effort to emphasize the social importance of said issues. The sixth dimension examines *crony capitalism*—how the collusion of power and money became a serious problem in China. Taken together, these six dimensions are much broader in scope than the prevailing form of collective resistance, the most common claims of which typically relate to specific policies or lower-level laws (O'Brien and Li 2006).

After identifying these six dimensions, I categorized any news report retrieved from WiseNews that dealt substantively with one of these issues as a “critical news report.” I first used the keywords listed in Table 4 for the preliminary selection of news reports. These keywords are common terms used to describe and discuss issues related to the six dimensions outlined above. Next, my research assistant and I decided whether one of the six dimensions was the major theme in each article in the domestic context. An article can only be classified as a critical news report once. I then counted the number of reports per dimension for each newspaper and divided the numbers of critical news reports by the total numbers of news reports for each newspaper along each dimension. Details about my analysis are presented in the online *Methodological Appendix*.

Finally, to capture the intensity of critical news reports, I also identified critical news reports that suggested the central government should be responsible for problems. Previous literature argues that resistance in China is limited in that resisters usually target their criticism at the local instead of central government (Lee 2007; O'Brien and Li 2006). Similarly, my interview data also reveal that, since criticism of the central government is so politically risky, journalists tend to avoid blaming the central government, even when they know it should be responsible for the local government's problems and institutional defects. This corresponds well to research on censorship in China that suggests the Chinese state is less likely to tolerate criticism of the central as opposed to the local government (Lorentzen 2013). As such, criticism of the central government can be considered a particularly intense form of critical news reporting and resistance.

In the second part of the empirical analysis, I examined the relationship between field environment and critical news reporting in order to develop an explanation of my research question. The primary data source for this part of the analysis was the in-depth interviews. I read through interview notes and transcripts carefully in order to understand the development of the journalistic field, the local environment in which that field was embedded, the motivation, identity, and actions of various actors, the conundrums that journalists faced, journalists' strategies to address these problems, the nature of resistance, and the interaction between macro-level conditions and micro-level practices in news production.

## **EXPLAINING CRITICAL NEWS REPORTING IN CHINA**

### **Variation in Critical News Reporting**

The results of my content analysis indicate that although China is ruled by a single-party authoritarian state well-known for censorship, that censorship has not completely silenced critical voices within the media. Table 5 presents the number of critical news reports for each newspaper, respectively. Table 6 and Figure 1 present the percentage of critical news reports for each newspaper. Table 7 and Figure 2 show the percentage of critical news reports by cities. My analysis yields several findings. First, among the newspapers that I analyzed, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* had the highest amount and percentage of critical news reports. Second, huge disparity exists between newspapers in different localities. Among the three cities, Guangzhou and Shanghai had the highest and lowest percentage of critical news reports, respectively; Beijing was in the middle. This disparity is striking given that the selected local newspapers aim to attract a similar readership in the most prosperous areas in China. Third, the *People's Daily*—

the central Party-state's mouthpiece—did report on some critical issues. This created some space for local newspapers to adopt similar framings and produce critical news reports. On average, the selected newspapers in Guangzhou and Beijing had a higher percentage of critical news reports than the *People's Daily*, even though the local newspapers lacked the political privilege of the latter. In contrast, the selected newspapers in Shanghai did not take advantage of the space created by the *People's Daily*.<sup>4</sup>

[Table 5]

[Table 6]

[Figure 1]

[Figure 2]

[Table 7]

I also identified critical news reports that suggested the central government should be responsible for the problems (see Tables 8, Table 9, and Figure 3). Let me give an example of such critical news reports. An article published by the *Southern Metropolis Daily* on October 16, 2006, discussed several cases in which local governments infringed upon citizens' rights by confiscating land. While the article criticized the local governments for violating law, it also blamed the central government for asking local government to be responsible for more and more public provision without allocating them adequate fiscal revenues. The article argued that the structural conditions determined by the central government motivated local governments to confiscate land illegally in order to gain fiscal revenues. My analysis reveals that, on average, the two newspapers in Guangzhou had the highest percentage of such critical news reports, directly

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<sup>4</sup> The resulting variation in critical news reporting across the three cities remains the same when I exclude the *Southern Metropolis Daily* from my analysis.

implicating the central government. The two newspapers in Beijing had the second highest percentage, while the two newspapers in Shanghai and the *People's Daily* had hardly any reports that challenged the central government.

[Table 8]

[Table 9]

[Figure 3]

The variation in terms of critical news reporting that I have identified maps onto the local environment of the journalistic field. In localities where the local journalist field was embedded in a relatively economically competitive and politically fragmented environment, newspapers had a higher percentage of critical news reports. These findings challenge previous research suggesting that Chinese media universally avoid reporting on fundamental and structural problems (Pan 2010; Zhao 2004). The correspondence between critical news reporting and structural conditions in each site suggests the need to specify how the local field environment in each location facilitated or limited the production of critical news reports.

In what follows, I provide a three-step explanation of the above variation. I first describe the national-level process by which the journalistic field became embedded in both the market and state fields. Then, I explain why the legal field became increasingly relevant to the journalistic field, and how the former facilitated the production of critical news reports within the latter. Finally, I describe how the local environment of the journalistic field influenced whether journalists could seize opportunities for critical news reporting.

## **Embeddedness of the Journalistic Field in between Market and State Fields**

Media marketization, a process that has accelerated in China since the early 1990s, has reshaped the field environment of the journalistic field. In the past, newspapers were mostly subsidized by the state and expected to serve as mouthpieces of state propaganda. Then, in 1992, the Party Congress recognized the concept of a socialist market economy and stated its goal of developing the country's service industry. The State Planning Commission officially categorized the news industry as part of the service industry. This confirmation of the role of news organizations as market actors accelerated the process of media marketization. From 1992 onward, the state reduced its funding of media, forcing newspapers to rely more and more on advertising and sales to survive. With this new goal of maximizing revenue, it became necessary for newspapers and journalists to consider consumers' preferences in ways previously unnecessary.

At the same time, the demand for news services rose along with the increase in the purchasing power of urban dwellers, giving rise to a huge expansion of local newspaper markets (Zhao 1998,47–53, 2000c). The rising number and income of urban readers convinced many Party-state agencies that the newspaper market held tremendous economic prospects. As a result, the number of newspapers skyrocketed. Numerous local newspapers competed for the same readers, leading to intensely competitive local newspaper markets (Wu 2000). Seeing the dramatic increase in the number of newspapers as a sign of inefficiency and a potential threat to political control, the Chinese state began to merge newspapers organizations into newspaper conglomerates (Zhao 2000c). This process of consolidation involved negotiations and bargains between different Party-state agencies, as the outcome promised to affect various agencies'



interests. In order to secure political control, the Chinese state, in principle, prohibited conglomerates to operate in multiple localities. It also prohibited the entry of foreign capital. By the early 2000s, some newspaper conglomerates had already become the golden geese of their local governments.

Though the journalistic field became newly embedded in the market field, it also remained embedded in the field of the state. Media marketization did not stop the Chinese state from still controlling the press and journalists (Esarey 2005; Hassid 2008; Stockmann 2013). Newspapers that had previously operated within the Party-state apparatus were still under pressure to follow the Party line. As part of the Party-state, newspaper organizations' structure reflects China's complex bureaucratic system. In general, each newspaper organization is affiliated with a Party-state agency and ranked accordingly within a state-established hierarchy. The rank of a newspaper organization is determined by the rank of the Party-state agency with which it is affiliated.

While the General Administration of Press and Publication under the State Council is responsible for drafting and enforcing regulations related to news organizations, the CCP's Department of Propaganda<sup>5</sup> is in charge of ideology and censorship. The propaganda system is structured hierarchically and geographically. The Department of Propaganda is situated at the top of the hierarchy. Each local Party-state has its own propaganda department. And each newspaper organization is directly supervised by the propaganda department at the same rank in the same

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<sup>5</sup> Whenever I refer to Department of Propaganda (capitalized as such), I am referring to the department associated with the central government.

locality. For instance, a newspaper affiliated with the Guangdong provincial Party-state is a provincial newspaper, so it is directly supervised by the provincial propaganda department in Guangdong; whereas a newspaper associated with the Guangzhou city Party-state is a city newspaper, and thus overseen by the city propaganda department in Guangzhou.

The propaganda departments at various levels exercise censorship before and after the publication of newspapers, and they delegate their authority to high-level editors, who are the internal censors in the press. The Department of Propaganda determines the topics and events that should or should not be covered. These instructions often employ abstract and vague concepts, such as social stability and national security, and provide few concrete guidelines. The instructions are transmitted to lower-level propaganda departments and then to newspaper organizations through meetings and the circulation of documents. Local propaganda officials have regular meetings with senior editors of local newspapers. Most of the time, lower-level journalists do not have a chance to see the instructions in print, they are informed of “the gist of documents (*wenjian jingshen*)” by higher-level editors. Many editors and journalists whom I interviewed emphasized that the instructions of the Department of Propaganda tend to be very vague and flexible, and that the gist of the instructions remains the same over time. *Ex-ante* censorship influences topic selection and framing of news reports, as well as journalists’ earnings. It is not uncommon for unpublished reports to be “shot to death (*qiangbi*)” by internal censors within newspaper organizations. Since part of journalists’ earnings depends on the number of published reports they produce, when their pieces are not published, they receive less income (Hassid 2008). Propaganda officials at various levels also conduct *ex-post* censorship by

reviewing published news articles. They can fire journalists or discipline journalists and newspaper organizations in many ways.

The state's political control does not mean that journalists are forbidden from reporting on critical social problems, but that journalists encounter risks when they do so. Nonetheless, contradictory political logics make critical news reporting possible. In the interviews, many journalists described the Chinese Party-state, newspapers, and journalists as having a “multiple personality disorder (*rengē fenlie* or *jingshen fenlie*),” as each group acts in self-contradictory ways. My interviewees related this “personality disorder” to the relatively liberal atmosphere of the late 1980s—a period in which Chinese leaders seriously considered political reform. In 1987, when General Secretary Zhao Ziyang reported to the Thirteenth Party Congress, he asserted that media should uncover problems to support so-called “supervision by public opinion (*yulun jiandu*)”—basically, the idea that the state should recruit the media to serve as a watchdog. Although Zhao Ziyang was later put under house arrest until his death because he was deemed to have been too lenient with the 1989 Tiananmen protesters, his idea of “supervision by public opinion” remained popular among his successors. According to my interviewees—including a former central-level propaganda official and a prominent communication scholar and government advisor—top Chinese leaders since 1989 have appealed to the notion of “supervision by public opinion” as a way to demonstrate that they are democratic and open-minded.

Despite this seemingly liberal gesture, my interview data suggest that most government officials at both central and local levels, especially those in the propaganda system, are not actually that enthusiastic about media's watchdog function and can restrict the ability of media to perform this role. Since reports on problems could threaten individual officials' economic and

political interests, such reports often trigger retaliation. In addition, my interview data suggest that propaganda officials, especially after the 1989 Tiananmen protests, tend to be the most politically conservative people in the officialdom. Journalists and propaganda officials whom I interviewed consistently told me that, despite the notion of “supervision by public opinion,” the dominant political logic continues to discourage, if not totally prohibit, reporting on social problems.

Despite the Party-state’s continuing control, the journalist profession transformed greatly with the unfolding of media marketization. Ultimately, media marketization created more space for journalists to think about and practice journalism. An older set of professional norms positioned journalists as mere mouthpieces of the state, but with marketization, norms viewing journalists as ordinary wage workers and/or as spokespersons for citizens emerged (Hassid 2011; Lee, He and Huang 2007; Pan and Chan 2003). Journalists who saw themselves as mere puppets tended to follow the instructions of propaganda departments, and journalists who viewed themselves as ordinary wage workers were often reluctant to pursue stories that could jeopardize their employment security. But journalists who saw themselves as spokespersons for the public were more likely to report on social problems, fight for professional autonomy, and resist the undue intervention of political and market forces.

### **The Relevance of the Legal Field to the Journalistic Field**

I turn next to how the Chinese state’s shift to law as a new mode of domination and its use of media to disseminate legal knowledge made the legal field increasingly relevant to the journalistic field. It may seem paradoxical to consider the significance of law in an authoritarian

state, but, in fact, the Chinese state relies heavily on legal institutions to strengthen its legitimacy and govern the country. It is essential here to understand the relatively recent embrace of law by the Chinese state following the Cultural Revolution. China was essentially “lawless” during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The state shifted to law as a new mode of domination in 1978 in order to address the legitimacy crisis engendered by the Cultural Revolution and to facilitate the transition to a market economy (Wang 2010, 5). The state also recognized law as a critical form of symbolic capital. This set the Chinese state up to be, itself, susceptible to the force of law. But the Chinese state’s adoption of law was by no means uncomplicated or unqualified. From the moment it initiated the shift, the state took an instrumental approach that belied its stated intention to develop the liberal democratic rule of law (Peerenboom 2002, 2006).

Chinese leaders believed that the success or failure of the transition to a new legal order hinged on how well law was disseminated to the Chinese populace. The desired order could be attained only if the majority of the populace knew and spontaneously obeyed the law. In addition, citizens would need to learn about the law in order to participate in the emerging market economy. Yet, determining how to disseminate this kind of understanding of and normative relationship to the law proved to be a daunting task in the 1980s, considering China’s huge population and territory. In order to make law work, the Chinese state diffused law and the concept of rights through political campaigns and media communication. In 1985, the Department of Propaganda and the Ministry of Justice jointly announced a five-year plan to disseminate law to the public. The dissemination campaign aimed to acquaint citizens with basic knowledge of the law. Between 1985 and 2010, five five-year plans of law dissemination were

implemented. Importantly, these campaigns relied heavily on the media to do the actual work of dissemination as part of their service to state propaganda.

Most importantly for the purposes of this discussion, the central state's shift to law as a new mode of domination, and especially its use of the media to disseminate law, created a bridge between the legal and journalistic fields. Given the Chinese state's usual effort to prevent connections across organizations in order to forestall the rise of competing political power, this institutional intersection created a novel and critical condition for the formation of networks across the legal and journalistic fields.

The transformation of the legal field also elevated the potential impact of the connection between the legal and journalistic fields. Similar to the development in the journalistic field, as the process of legal reform unfolded, the legal profession became more established and diversified over time. Legal professionals' ability to interpret and apply law continued to improve. Though the state retained ultimate control, the expanding legal service market afforded the legal profession more independence (Peerenboom 2002). Furthermore, how legal professionals identified themselves in relation to the state and society gradually changed. Contrary to the past, many legal professionals no longer view themselves as mere servants of the state (Peerenboom 2002, 351). Although the majority of legal professionals are still focused on making money, some have begun to see themselves as guardians of citizens' rights, as indicated by the emergence of public interest lawyers and "rights protection lawyers." This transformation has impacted how legal professionals engage with the law (Fu and Cullen 2008).

## **How Local Field Environment Shaped the Connection between the Journalistic and Legal Fields and Critical News Reporting**

Although the Chinese government made law increasingly relevant to the journalistic field, how this field was embedded within specific local market and state fields influenced whether journalists therein could seize opportunities for critical news reporting. In this section, I show how the local environment of the journalistic field moderated the use of network mechanisms and impacted critical news reporting in each of Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai.

### *Guangzhou: Robust Collaboration between Media and Legal Professionals*

*The field environment of the journalistic field in Guangzhou.*—The field environment of the journalistic field in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province, is relatively competitive, compared with its counterparts in Beijing and Shanghai. Guangzhou's intensely competitive newspaper market is due, in part, to the fact that China's economic reform first unfolded in Guangdong. In 1994, the Administration of Press and Publication came up with criteria for establishing newspaper conglomerates. Considering newspapers in Guangzhou highly competent, the Administration approved three newspaper conglomerates in Guangzhou in the late 1990s: the Guangzhou Daily News Group, the Southern Media Group, and the Yangcheng Evening News Group. These three groups became the three earliest-established newspaper conglomerates in China, with each owning multiple newspapers. In 2005, the World Association of Newspapers included five newspapers in Guangzhou as the top 100 paid daily newspapers in the world in terms of circulation. No other cities in China had so many newspapers included on the list.

In addition to a very competitive market, the journalistic field in Guangdong is situated in relation to a relatively fragmented field of the state. Since Guangzhou city is the provincial capital of Guangdong province, both provincial and city Party-state agencies are located there, including the provincial and city Propaganda Departments. The three newspaper conglomerates are part of the local Party-state. The Guangzhou Daily News Group is affiliated with the CCP Guangzhou Municipal Committee, while the Southern Media Group and the Yangcheng Evening News Group are affiliated with the CCP Guangdong Provincial Committee.

The complex bureaucratic system in Guangzhou diminishes the capacity of the central Department of Propaganda to produce coherent censorship standards. Both provincial and city Party-states in Guangzhou are state actors and market players. Although provincial and city propaganda departments in Guangzhou both belong to the propaganda system, they are also part of their own local Party-states and thus influenced by the interests of the local Party-states. As a result, provincial and city Propaganda Departments do not necessarily have coherent censorship practices. The problem results, in part, from the asymmetrical political and economic relationship between the provincial and city-level Party-states. In Guangzhou's newspaper market, the provincial and city newspapers are supposed to compete on a level playing field, but their different positions in the official hierarchy motivate the provincial Party-state to translate their political power into economic interests. Ultimately, local Party-states want their newspapers to profit and contribute to their tax revenues, as long as those newspapers do not cause intractable political problems in the process. Consequently, sometimes provincial propaganda departments enforce censorship standards set by the central Party-state in a more flexible manner when it comes to provincial newspapers. In a similar vein, the official hierarchy also influences



the decision-making of newspaper organizations. For instance, since the city propaganda department in Guangzhou has no authority over provincial newspapers, provincial newspapers sometimes make editorial decisions at the expense of the interests of the city Party-state. As I will show below, this contradiction within the complex bureaucratic structure opens up opportunities for journalists.

*How the field environment shaped the connection between the journalistic and legal fields*—Since the late 1990s, Chinese people have increasingly demanded more information about the social problems engendered by the country’s transition to a market economy. Though many newspapers were interested in investigating these problems and possible solutions, critical reporting was rare due to government censorship. The highly competitive market for news in Guangzhou, however, forced journalists and newspapers to take consumers’ demands more seriously. Intensive market competition also gave public-minded journalists leverage to persuade managerial cadres to take more political risks.

In fact, the intensifying market demand for critical news reports in Guangzhou aligned with an increasingly popular norm among journalists to see themselves as spokespersons for citizens. As one journalist at the *Yangcheng Evening News* recalled: “Our pursuit of professional ideals was quite consistent with newspapers’ pursuit of market profits. Although the managerial cadres were concerned about political risks, they understood that we would lose the market share if we could not satisfy the demands of readers. No other place in China was like Guangzhou—we were competing with the most competitive newspapers in the country” (June 2011,

Guangzhou). Market logics and emerging professional norms thus worked together to increase the demand for more critical news reports under the conditions of a highly competitive market.

But when Guangzhou journalists attempted to satisfy market demands and enact their professional ideals, they encountered two hurdles. The first difficulty was political risk. Even though Party leaders in the central government occasionally encouraged “supervision by public opinion,” this mostly stood in stark contrast to the actual practices of state agencies. Propaganda officials still tend to view critical news reports as a deviation from an important principle—that newspapers should report on the Party-state’s achievements, not its problems. Furthermore, since critical news reports might affect government officials’ political career and economic interests, government officials and their associates often retaliate against outspoken journalists and newspapers.

The second hurdle that journalists encountered when they decided to produce more critical news reports was a technical one: Guangzhou journalists found that their training was inadequate for analyzing emerging societal problems. This was due partly to the unfolding legal reforms, which were busy translating myriad societal problems into legal issues. As many of my interviewees pointed out, the best and safest way to frame a phenomenon as a problem is to demonstrate its deviation from legal texts or principles. But most journalists knew little about the legal system that was being so rapidly introduced to enable the new market economy, let alone how to use law as an analytical tool or a weapon of self-defense.

To overcome the political and technical hurdles, journalists began to collaborate with legal professionals. Journalists in the Southern Media Group, including both the *Southern Metropolis Daily* and the *Southern Weekly*, sought assistance from lawyers and legal scholars. Legal experts could not only help journalists to investigate and analyze societal problems, they could also assess the political and legal risks that journalists might encounter.<sup>6</sup> As one journalist put it, “Lawyers know the art and skill of resistance. They can better calculate the cost of resistance and prepare for battles” (June 2011, Guangzhou). The *Southern Weekly*’s national reputation and popularity among intellectuals brought the *Southern Metropolis Daily* many collaborators, including nationally-renowned legal scholars and lawyers, as well as a small number of open-minded government officials in the legislative and judicial branches. The Southern Media Group’s strategy was also mimicked by other Guangzhou newspapers, including the *Yangcheng Evening News*. These newspapers successfully collaborated with local legal scholars and lawyers in Guangzhou.

While collaboration between journalists and the legal profession helped the former to address new problems and demands, the relationship also benefited certain legal professionals—specifically, political liberals who were committed to protecting citizens’ rights and advancing a “genuine” rule of law. Public attention and support generated by media helped legal professionals push the government to follow the law. Like journalists, legal professionals are also subject to the arbitrary power of the authoritarian state. When legal professionals pressure

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<sup>6</sup> According to my interviewees, this problem-solving strategy was not borrowed from media in Hong Kong or elsewhere but, instead, developed endogenously.

the government to follow the law and protect citizens' rights, they run their own risk of retaliation from government officials. Publicizing the wrongdoing of government officials can prevent such retaliation, thus journalists could help legal professionals protect themselves (Liebman 2005; Liu and Halliday 2011). Furthermore, for legal professionals interested in advocating a "genuine" rule of law, newspapers provide a good medium for their ideas. As a result, legal professionals who identified themselves as guardians of citizens' rights and journalists who saw themselves as spokespersons for the people made natural allies. Importantly, this collaboration was not politically implausible. Although the Chinese state generally discourages and in some cases even forbids regular interactions between individuals across organizations and fields, the interaction between journalists and those in the legal profession seemed appropriate at the time, given that the government was asking journalists to publicize legal knowledge and oversee local problems according to law.

In this process of collaboration, public-spirited journalists and legal professionals not only pursued their own respective agendas, but also developed a common goal of cultivating civil society—and critical news reporting was seen as an important means of achieving that goal. Actors in both fields also shared an understanding of China's critical historical events and its current problems that motivated them to pursue socio-political and cultural change. The 1989 Tiananmen protests, for example, loomed large in the memories of both groups. Most of my interviewees in the Guangzhou collaborative networks mentioned how much the Tiananmen incident impacted their career choices and linked their professional goals to specific political agendas. These interviewees also alluded to the influence that the CCP's former General Secretary Zhao Ziyang had on them. Although Zhao is still designated as part of the unspoken

history of the CCP, his political reform agenda and increasing disenchantment with the communist regime greatly impacted many journalists and legal professionals in the Guangzhou collaborative networks.

These professionals perceived the current single-party rule as the root of China's problems. Many of them described how they had become disillusioned with the CCP over time and frankly expressed their opposition to it. As legal professionals, they sought to advance the development of a genuine rule of law and civil society in China, something they thought could bring about the country's democratization. As they saw it, critical news reporting would help Chinese citizens become politically self-conscious, forcing the government, in turn, to become accountable to its citizens. A journalist at the *Southern Metropolis Daily* described the evolving nature of such collaboration:

The alliance turned out to be like a loosely connected, informal political party. We collaborate because our political views are similar in critical aspects and we want to bring about political, social, and cultural change. Political liberals who highly value citizens' rights and genuine rule of law are much more motivated to cultivate such collaborative relations. Journalists and lawyers who see themselves as wage laborers, or who are fine with the dominant official discourse and practices, are not motivated to do these extra and risky things. They can just follow ordinary routines and live a satisfying life. (June 2011, Beijing)

Understanding the political nature of this collaboration is important as it reveals why many journalists and legal professionals associated with collaborative networks in Guangzhou saw critical news reports as resistance against CCP's political control and persisted in producing critical news reports, despite potential and actual political repression.

The fragmented field of the state in Guangzhou allowed journalists to collaborate with legal professionals, providing opportunity for resistance. Journalists in Guangzhou figured out

how to utilize the “cracks” in the bureaucratic structure in two ways. First, journalists in some provincial newspapers exploited the political power of their newspaper organizations in the official hierarchy to produce critical news reports. Journalists at these provincial newspapers usually avoided directly criticizing the central government, the communist regime, or the Guangdong provincial Party-state. What they produced instead were reports targeting their criticism at local Party-state agencies with no authority over the Guangdong provincial newspapers, such as lower-level governments in Guangdong or local governments outside Guangdong. And within these articles, journalists found ways to include suggestions that problems were not just local but systematic. As a journalist at the *Southern Metropolis Daily* explained:

When writing a critical news report, we often write in a tone that sounds as if we were the central government. We criticize local governments and individual officials for breaking the law. Of course, we know that the central government should be held accountable as well, so we do try very hard to suggest to readers that many societal problems in China are systematically rooted in China’s institutions and political regime. (June 2011, Guangzhou)

The Southern Media Group, including the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, was well-known for utilizing its political position in the government hierarchy to produce such critical news reports.

To be sure, managerial cadres of newspapers organizations still faced pressure from provincial propaganda officials responsible to the central Department of Propaganda. These cadres often needed to convince provincial propaganda officials that the economic return of their reports for the provincial Party-state would outweigh the political costs. And for their part, provincial propaganda officials sometimes turned a blind eye to critical news reporting if they estimated that reports would not lead to intervention from central-level propaganda officials.

The second way in which journalists exploited the fragmented political structure was to produce critical news reports based on news reports already published elsewhere. In Guangzhou, the *Southern Metropolis Daily*'s outspoken reporting provided cover for other local newspapers when it published critical news reports, as these reports could usually be reprinted without sanction. One journalist at the *Yangcheng Evening News* explained: "If *Southern Metropolis Daily* has already reported on a problem, we can continue to report it, given that the news is already released and we are not the first newspaper to stir up trouble" (June 2011, Guangzhou). Indeed, as the provincial propaganda department has authority over the city propaganda department and is the highest censorship authority in Guangzhou, once provincial newspapers reported on certain problems, journalists in other newspapers in Guangzhou could then assume that those reports already passed the censorship at the provincial-level. As such, a follow-up was less likely to be questioned by either city or provincial propaganda officials. Furthermore, the intense market competition in Guangzhou pushed journalists and newspapers to seize upon such opportunities created by other newspaper organizations.

*News reporting under robust collaboration.*—The combination of a relatively competitive local newspaper market and fragmented political structure in Guangzhou made it possible for journalists to collaborate with legal professionals and, in turn, produce critical news reports. By allying with legal professionals, journalists in Guangzhou gained valuable resources for critical news reporting. Legal professionals assisted journalists in three non-mutually exclusive ways. First, they provided expert advice, answering journalists' questions. Second, some legal professionals actually wrote articles for newspapers themselves, when requested to do so by journalists. Third, legal professionals assisted journalists with news topic selection,

investigation, and framing. Many journalists pointed out in their interviews that lawyers were among the most knowledgeable critics of social problems. Lawyers' interactions with citizens across strata and localities made them critical commentators on many social problems. In some instances, lawyers even sent their employees to help journalists to investigate stories. These various forms of assistance greatly aided critical news reporting.

One important consequence of these alliances was that journalists were able to broaden the “gray area” of reporting. Although certain topics remain strictly forbidden in China, a gray area does exist (Lin 2008) and legal professionals are particularly adept at working within this gray space by articulating potentially sensitive problems using language that is acceptable to the central government. A lawyer who worked with the *Southern Metropolis Daily* said:

We know how to frame problems properly in accordance with law. There is an old Chinese proverb, “Set your own spear against your own shield.” It means that we refute somebody with his or her own argument. If we want to criticize the government and uncover problems, we need to frame the problems according to the official language, that is, law. We actually use the official language to challenge the official ideology. (June 2011, Beijing)

Thanks to the contributions of legal experts, critical news reporting tended to have broader claims and deeper critiques than other forms of collective resistance.

In addition to providing resources for critical news reporting, collaboration between the two professions also empowered journalists to decrease their own self-censorship. As a journalist at the *Yangcheng Evening News* explained: “The real power of censorship and political control lies in its inducing fear and self-censorship. After my colleagues and I worked with lawyers, we become much more confident and less constrained by censorship” (June 2011, Guangzhou).



Compelling journalists to self-censor was one of the most effective means through which the government enforced censorship; thus, when journalists gained new confidence as a result of their collaboration with the legal profession, it decreased the power of the censorship system.

By collaborating with liberal-leaning legal professionals, journalists in Guangzhou were able to get around some censorship issues and produce more critical reports—an outcome that deviated from and even undermined the original purpose of the government’s law dissemination programs. The irony of this outcome was not lost on my interviewees; as one journalist at the *Southern Metropolis Daily* explained, “We have been implementing the task of law dissemination as required by the government. We just use this opportunity to diffuse ideas about genuine rule of law and talk about problems in Chinese society” (June 2011, Guangzhou). Of course, the porous field environment and collaboration with legal professionals did not shield Guangzhou newspapers from political repression completely. Critical news reports produced by Guangzhou newspapers could and did trigger repression, and periodic crackdowns and battles between journalists in Guangzhou and regulatory agencies were common. The point, however, is that critical news reporting emerged and persisted despite the ongoing use of such repressive state tactics.

*Beijing: Partial Collaboration between Media and Legal Professionals*

*The field environment of the journalistic field in Beijing.*—The broader field environment of the journalistic field in Beijing is less porous than that in Guangzhou due to the former’s less competitive local newspaper market (Huang and Zeng 2011; Liu 2010). In the early 2000s, there were four conglomerates in Beijing: the Guangming Daily News Group, the Economic Daily

News Group, the Beijing Daily News Group, and the Beijing Youth Daily News Group. But the Economic Daily News Group did not publish newspapers targeting general urban dwellers, and the news groups and newspapers in Beijing were not as highly developed and capable as those in Guangzhou.

While the newspaper market in Beijing is not as competitive as that in Guangzhou, the journalistic field in Beijing, like that in Guangzhou, is situated in a relatively fragmented state field. Because Beijing is a municipality and the national capital, both national and provincial Party-state agencies reside there. Many central Party-state agencies publish newspapers, such as the Communist Youth League's influential *China Youth Daily*, which are directly supervised by the Department of Propaganda. But the bureaucratic structure in Beijing creates two problems for censorship. First, central-level newspapers do not necessarily follow the instructions of the Department of Propaganda. Since the state agencies with which central-level newspapers are affiliated have the same rank as the Department of Propaganda in the official hierarchy, journalists in these newspapers do not always feel that they are subordinate to the Department of Propaganda. In some situations, their boss could be more politically powerful than the head of the Department of Propaganda. Second, as central-level state agencies are more highly ranked in the official hierarchy than the Beijing municipal propaganda department, they do not necessarily need to consider the interests of the latter. The multi-level government structure thus makes censorship inconsistent and avoidable in Beijing.

*How the field environment shaped the connection between the journalistic and legal fields*—The ways in which field environment shaped critical news reporting in Beijing were

closely related to similar processes in Guangzhou, but they followed a different pattern. Although newspapers in Guangzhou were often targets of repression, they were still relatively successful in several respects. Guangzhou newspapers gained market revenue and earned the respect of readers and journalist communities throughout China. As a result, the strategies and practices of Guangzhou newspapers were often emulated by newspapers in other localities. My interviewees in Beijing said that journalists there, like their counterparts in Guangzhou, adopted the same collaborative practices with legal experts. However, due to differences in the two cities' respective local field environments, the newspapers in Beijing were not as successful in their efforts to produce critical news reports.

The multi-level, fragmented field of the state in Beijing did allow local newspapers to produce critical news reports. The main challengers of the censorship order in Beijing were newspapers, such as the *China Youth Daily*, affiliated with central Party-state agencies. Utilizing their position in the official hierarchy, these central-level newspapers reported on problems in Beijing and elsewhere, even though their reporting could have negative consequences on Beijing and other local governments. As a journalist in the *China Youth Daily* put it:

Central-level newspapers do not have to listen to the Beijing municipal government or local governments in other places, so they sometimes are able to report news that cannot be covered by local newspapers. This is why the Beijing local government has been asking the central government to let them take over newspapers that are directly supervised by the Central Propaganda Department. (June 2011, Beijing)

Sometimes, when journalists at municipal newspapers encountered censorship problems, they talked to and provided materials to journalists at central-level newspapers in order to get news published. And as in Guangzhou, when higher-level newspaper organizations published critical

news reports, they provided cover to other newspapers in Beijing, as these reports could then be reprinted without sanction.

But even though journalists in Beijing could take advantage of the fragmented political structure there to resist political forces and produce critical news reports, such actions were not as common in Beijing as they were in Guangzhou due to the less competitive market in Beijing. The less competitive market gave newspaper organizations greater power over readers and public-spirited journalists. Journalists in Beijing acknowledged that since the newspaper markets in Beijing were less competitive, local newspapers there experienced less pressure to satisfy market demands, even though readers there expressed a similar desire to know more about social problems. As a result, the managerial cadres at Beijing newspapers did not see a pressing need for journalists to collaborate with legal or other experts.

The less competitive market was also unfavorable for recruiting public-minded journalists, thus decreasing the chance of collaboration between media and legal professionals. Many journalists committed to citizen advocacy preferred working in an environment where they saw more opportunities to push the boundaries of reporting. Recognizing that the market structure in Beijing gave them less space to do this, many talented and public-minded journalists chose to work for newspapers in Guangzhou instead. A journalist for the *Beijing Times* explained:

In Beijing, because the market was less competitive than that in Guangzhou, many managerial cadres did not worry too much about market revenues. In this situation, it is difficult for journalists to persuade managerial cadres to take more political risks. Knowing this situation, many public-spirited journalists chose to work in Guangzhou. (June 2011, Beijing).

As a result of this self-selection, journalists for local newspapers in Beijing were not as motivated as their Guangzhou counterparts by professional ideals or the desire to advance social-political and cultural change and they were also less supportive of one another. Furthermore, journalists in Beijing were less likely to actively collaborate with legal professionals in order to expand the boundaries of critical news reporting.

*News reporting under partial collaboration.*—The configuration of the journalistic, market, and state fields in Beijing impacted the extent to which journalists there utilized network mechanisms to produce critical news reports in two related ways. First, the broader field environment impacted the *scope* of collaboration. Legal professionals did work with journalists, but their role in news production was relatively limited compared with what was taking place in Guangzhou. Legal professionals helped journalists in Beijing to analyze social problems, while also writing commentaries on social problems for newspapers, but they did not have much substantive participation in news selection and investigation. As a result, the ability of journalists to stretch the gray area of news reporting was much more limited.

Second, the field environment in Beijing also impacted the *nature* of collaboration. The networks that developed between legal experts and journalists in Beijing were less politicized compared with those that developed in Guangzhou. Although many interviewees in the Beijing collaborative network saw critical news reports as important to the development of an informed citizenry and the rule of law in China, few of them alluded to critical historical events that motivated them, or to their own efforts to bring about social or political change. Unlike their counterparts in Guangzhou, journalists and legal professionals in the Beijing collaborative

network did not share a cohesive political outlook or agenda. As a result, when they perceived considerable political risk, their lower level of enthusiasm and commitment about advancing socio-political and cultural change led them to err on the side of political safety.

*Shanghai: Stifled Collaboration between Media and Legal Professionals*

*The field environment of the journalistic field in Shanghai.*—The journalistic field in Shanghai is situated in a less porous environment than its Guangzhou and Beijing counterparts. Similar to the situation in Beijing, the local newspaper market in Shanghai is less competitive than that in Guangzhou (Liu 2010). There were two newspaper conglomerates in Shanghai in the early 2000s: the Wenhui-Xinmin Press Group and the Jiefang Daily News Group. Both groups were affiliated with the Shanghai municipal Party-state.

The field environment in Shanghai is distinguished by the relatively unified field of the state. Unlike Guangzhou and Beijing, a single-level Party-state resides in Shanghai. In terms of censorship, the Shanghai municipal Propaganda Department serves as a *de facto* “local emperor.” The two news groups in Shanghai are both affiliated with the Shanghai municipal government, and neither can claim higher authority over the Shanghai Party-state. As a result, the relationship between newspapers organizations and the Shanghai municipal Propaganda Department is much less complicated than that in Guangzhou and Beijing.

*How the field environment shaped the connection between the journalistic and legal fields*—Newspapers in Shanghai were also influenced by the collaborative model of critical news

reporting in Guangzhou. When considering how to enhance market and professional performance in the early 2000s, journalists in Shanghai looked to other newspaper organizations. Similar to journalists in Guangzhou, Shanghai journalists found that readers were eager to know more about emerging social problems. These journalists also realized that the rule of law, which was intertwined with these problems, was the key to understanding and resolving them. A journalist in the *Shanghai Morning Post* recalled:

Many problems have occurred in the process of China's economic development. For example, workers cannot get their wages. People without urban dweller status are treated as second-class citizens due to the household registration system. There are various problems, and we realize that every problem is related to unenforced or unjust laws. Things were not like that in the past. Because of the importance of law in everyday life and in official rhetoric, we thought that collaborating with the legal profession, as Guangzhou journalists do, would be a great idea. (August 2011, phone interview)

Guangzhou newspapers stood out as examples for newspapers in Shanghai, but journalists in Shanghai had even less success in adopting the model.

Shanghai journalists eager to replicate Guangzhou's collaborative practices experienced great difficulty transplanting the model to Shanghai given the less porous field environment there. Similar to the situation in Beijing, the structure of the newspaper market in Shanghai was not favorable to the adoption of the Guangzhou model. The competition in the Shanghai newspaper market was not as high as in Guangzhou. Many managerial cadres at Shanghai newspapers tended to believe that their newspapers could be profitable without taking political risks. Furthermore, Shanghai municipal Party-state officials did not consider competition between newspapers relevant to them. A senior editor at the *Xinmin Evening News* explained to me: "Ultimately, the Shanghai municipal government received the same revenues. All of the newspapers were part of the Shanghai government. Competition mattered for newspapers but not

the Shanghai government. This is different from what happened in Guangzhou, where the provincial government was competing with the city government for revenues from newspapers” (June 2014, Shanghai). As a result of the market structure in Shanghai, managerial cadres of newspaper organizations did not have leverage to negotiate with the Shanghai municipal Party-state about the boundaries of reporting.

Unlike journalists in Beijing, Shanghai journalists encountered a further obstacle—concentrated political power—when attempting to adopt the Guangzhou model. As I have mentioned, the multi-level government structure in Guangzhou and Beijing created tensions that journalists and legal professionals could exploit to produce critical news reports. In comparison, a single propaganda department directly regulated and monitored every local newspaper in Shanghai, and no newspaper organization was higher than the Shanghai propaganda department in the official hierarchy. When officials in the Shanghai Department of Propaganda determined that news content was inappropriate, they called newspaper organizations directly to issue a warning. Sometimes the officials also notified other newspaper organizations in Shanghai to prevent them from covering the inappropriate stories. Essentially, the single-level government structure in Shanghai facilitated an extremely effective form of censorship that was much easier to enforce.

The less fragmented field of the state in Shanghai also substantially restricted collaboration between legal experts and journalists. The legal profession had little opportunity to comment on social problems or to participate in news topic selection, investigation, or framing. To be sure, Shanghai newspapers did invite legal experts to write commentaries, but



collaboration often ceased following intervention by the Shanghai propaganda department. A journalist at the *Shanghai Morning Post* explained:

We did want to have collaboration with legal professionals and public intellectuals, but there were a lot of difficulties. Local government officials, especially those in the Propaganda Department, frown on such collaboration. They call us when they see our reports. Knowing our situation, potential collaborators tend to prefer working with news organizations that give them more freedom. (July 2011, phone interview)

Apparently, the concentrated political structure not only interrupted ongoing collaboration, but also discouraged legal professionals from working with Shanghai newspapers at all.

*News reporting under stifled collaboration.*—Owing to the unfavorable field environment in Shanghai, although the institutional connections of the journalistic field and law created a structural opportunity for critical news reporting, the reports that resulted tended to adhere to the original purpose of the law dissemination programs—namely, helping citizens to obey the law and strengthening the government’s legitimacy.

Instead of producing critical news reports, the institutional connections between the journalistic and legal fields spurred two kinds of news reports in Shanghai. The first entailed journalists touching base with government officials in charge of legal affairs in order to obtain relevant laws, policies, and court decisions, and then simply disseminating them verbatim. The second kind of report contained happy accounts of citizens using the law to combat injustice and the government protecting citizens’ rights. Such stories satisfied not only the government’s demand for “positive” propaganda and law dissemination, but also readers’ demand for legal knowledge (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011). Instead of interviewing legal professionals who knew the odds of successful legal mobilization, journalists were pressured into interviewing only

those citizens who were lucky enough to experience justice. In the process of producing both types of reports, journalists in Shanghai did not use the law to reveal fundamental problems in Chinese society; rather, they helped the state to advance its authoritarian political order.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

My empirical analysis provides a more nuanced picture of Chinese media and an example of a boundary-pushing form of collective resistance. Scholars often describe Chinese media as successful in propagandizing for the government and pursuing economic benefits (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011), but uninterested in democratic causes (Pan 2010; Zhao 2004). The conventional description is, indeed, applicable to certain Chinese media, as demonstrated by the two selected newspapers in Shanghai. Nonetheless, as I have shown here, journalists in Guangzhou and, to a lesser degree, in Beijing did attempt to produce news reports critical of the existing political structure. Although journalists were closely watched by the state, their very embeddedness within the state in some contexts afforded them political power over certain state agencies and opportunities to collaborate with legal professionals. These conditions, in turn, allowed journalists to make more boundary-pushing claims. Going beyond the prevailing form of collective resistance, which demands only the implementation of law (Lee 2007; O'Brien and Li 2006), journalists working in the amenable contexts mobilized constitutional principles, called for broader civil and political rights, and challenged the legitimacy of law; sometimes they even questioned the central government. Accordingly, I echo the argument of Zhao and Lin (2008) that existing studies tend to overlook the democratic aspect of Chinese media. And I complement

their national-level observation with a sub-national level analysis that considers media heterogeneity.

Nonetheless, the above findings about variation in critical news reporting should not be over-interpreted. Critical news reporting still operated within the limit of the constitution, without challenging the political monopoly of the CCP. In addition, as my findings only show variation at the sub-national level, they are limited in their ability to answer questions about political liberalization at a national-level. Therefore, my findings do not contradict research that examines the relationship between media and political liberalization at the national-level (Stockmann 2013). Furthermore, the proportion of critical reports is far below one percent at even the most critical newspaper in my study. In comparison, studies in the U.S. and Europe find significantly higher levels of critical news reporting (around one to five percentage) (Benson 2013; Fink and Schudson 2014). This suggests the ongoing adverse impact of China's authoritarian regime on critical news reporting.

In addition to demonstrating variation in critical news reporting, I argue that local field environment can alternately enable or constrain critical news reporting. A more politically fragmented and economically competitive field environment allowed journalists to produce critical news reports by collaborating with legal professionals. Three alternative explanations need to be addressed here. First, it could be argued that the underlying tensions in each locality influenced critical news reporting. Lorentzen (2013) argues that an authoritarian regime's optimal strategy is to allow more critical reporting to target lower-level officials in order to improve governance, but that there will still be variation in the amount of critical news reporting

depending on the level of underlying social tensions because the regime also wants to minimize the risk of overthrow. Hence, Lorentzen's explanation for the variation across the three cities would be that there were fewer underlying tensions in Guangzhou than in Beijing, and that these two cities, in turn, had fewer social tensions than Shanghai. According to Tong and Lei's (2014) study of large-scale social protests in the period between 2003 and 2010, Guangdong had the most social protests in the country, while the numbers of protests in Beijing and Shanghai were comparable with each other. The Annual Report on China's Rule of Law published by the Institute of Law of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2014) came up with a similar observation. But my research does not support the contention that the Chinese government allowed more critical news reporting when or where local social tensions were lower. In fact, my analysis shows that, when producing critical news reports, newspapers did not focus on cases in the places where they were located. For instance, around 85% of the critical news reports in the two Guangzhou newspapers were about stories outside of Guangdong. Furthermore, although Beijing and Shanghai had similar levels of social tensions, newspapers in the two localities varied greatly in terms of critical news reporting. Therefore, level of social tensions in each locality cannot explain variation in critical news reporting.

Second, it could be argued that the large amount of critical news reporting in Guangdong was due to Hong Kong's influence on citizens and journalists in Guangzhou, given the geographic proximity of the two places. Citizens in Guangzhou were, indeed, influenced by the popular culture in Hong Kong, but there is no convincing evidence showing that their political views were influenced by Hong Kong's political culture. In fact, my interview data suggest that journalists in Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai observed similar demand for critical news

reporting. Furthermore, my interview data did not support that journalism practices in Hong Kong were more influential for journalists in Guangzhou than in the other two cities. As I have shown, the collaboration model of critical news reporting developed indigenously in Guangzhou. As the political and economic conditions in China and Hong Kong differ greatly, journalism practices in Hong Kong provide Chinese journalists with limited insight about how to resist political pressure.

A third alternative explanation is that newspapers in Guangzhou were sheltered by high-level government officials, affording those newspapers the ability to produce critical news reports (Pan 2010; Zhao 2000b, 2004). Here, it is important to note that my analysis of critical news reports was between 2003 and 2006—precisely when, in fact, newspapers in Guangzhou experienced a number serious crackdowns. After the *Southern Metropolis Daily* disclosed the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in 2003, the propaganda department in Guangdong appointed its top official as the editor-in-chief of the Southern Daily Group, in order to control news production directly. In 2004, the chief editor of the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, Cheng Yizhong, was detained by the Guangdong government for almost six months. Journalists whom I interviewed in Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai mostly disagreed that newspapers in Guangzhou were especially sheltered by government officials. In sum, none of the above alternative explanations can adequately account for the variation in critical news reporting

In addition to specifying the structural conditions that facilitated or inhibited critical news reporting, I also show how journalists resisted political pressure and produced critical news reports through collaboration with the legal profession. My findings demonstrate that the

conventional framework for understanding news production is inadequate as it only focuses on the interaction between journalists, the market, and the state and assumes the irrelevance of other institutions and actors on news production. Some research in the Chinese context does suggest that the presence of alliances between journalists and other social groups could enable the former to resist political pressure, but it quickly points out that the absence of opposition parties and independent citizens' groups limits this possibility (Zhao 2000b, 591). I show, however, that such alliances may be more likely than currently thought and, in fact, are already happening today. Importantly, the alliances between the media and legal professions for critical news reporting provides an example of cross-sectoral collective resistance, which seldom occurs in China given the state's hostility to cross-boundary interactions (O'Brien and Li 2006).

It is also meaningful to situate my findings regarding law in relation to Habermas's account of the rise of the classic bourgeois public sphere in Europe. In Habermas's study, private law secured the individual autonomy so that private people were able to pursue their affairs with one another from impositions by the state (Habermas 1989, 76). In the Chinese case, although law does not secure the autonomy of individuals or society, the Chinese state's shift to law as a new mode of domination and its use of media to disseminate legal knowledge rendered law a symbolic resource against the state's power and facilitated collaboration between liberal-leaning legal and media professionals.

This study contributes to the literature upon which I draw in the following ways. First, while Fligstein and McAdam's (2011, 2012) field theory postulates that field environment imposes constraints and provides opportunities for the actors in the field in question, it does not

further theorize what kinds of field environment would provide opportunities for resistance. By examining the plural ways in which the journalistic field was embedded in the market and state as well as how these various configurations alternately enabled and inhibited critical news reporting, I demonstrate that a more porous political and economic environment can provide more opportunities for critical news reporting. Second, studies that draw on the fragmented authoritarianism model or the concept of political opportunity (e.g., O'Brien and Li 2006) often suggest that fragmentation in state agencies and political opportunity is omnipresent in China due to the complexity of government structure. Yet, little study of contentious politics in the Chinese context has explored precisely how level of fragmentation influences collective resistance. By comparing the structure of state agencies and newspaper organizations as well as news production across the three cities, I demonstrate that even though newspapers were theoretically regulated by the Chinese state in the same way across the nation, the local structure of state agencies, particularly the number of government levels involved in news production and regulation, moderated the propaganda system's top-down control. Third, previous studies do not discuss the interaction between the structure of market and state agencies. I contribute to existing literature by suggesting that market structure (i.e., level of competition) can moderate the effect of fragmented bureaucratic structures. The Chinese case also reveals that market forces can align with professional norms, aiding journalists to pursue their professional ideals when state censorship leaves readers' demands unsatisfied. This echoes Guobin Yang's (2009) work on how providers of new media content stretch the boundaries of allowable content in order to attract users.

In closing, it is important to acknowledge that the findings of this research are still limited in three ways and, thus, invite further study. First, the generalizability of my findings is restricted by case selection. I restricted my analysis to news produced by newspapers. In addition, the selection of newspaper organizations for this research was restricted to the coastal region of China and newspapers without cross-regional background in order to facilitate comparison. Research not limited by such constraints would help to test the generalizability of my findings.

Second, my content analysis focused on the period between 2003 and 2006 and thus cannot speak to developments since then. The Chinese state's responses to journalists' collective resistance, as well as journalists' reactions, have been interesting. The state has already taken various steps to repress critical news reporting. The central government began to destroy social networks associated with critical news reporting by targeting highly centralized people within those networks. Many journalists were removed from their positions, but they and other journalists shifted to a different battle ground: the Internet. They began to work for Internet companies and influenced news production on the Internet instead. The Chinese state also tried to reduce the fragmentation of state agencies. Future research can examine these new developments to better understand conditions for collective resistance. Relatedly, a growing body of research investigates how the Internet has impacted politics in China, particularly in terms of contributing to an increasingly critical citizenry and a rise in citizen activism (Lei 2011; Yang 2009). It is reasonable to expect that information communication technologies have also affected the journalist community and its relations with other social groups, which could further impact the ability of journalists to produce critical news reports. Fruitful future research could



examine the extent to which and the conditions under which information communication technologies impact journalists' news production and resistance.

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