# Journal of
# Current Chinese Affairs

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# Stability Maintenance and Chinese Media: Beyond Political Communication?

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For political scientists, Chinese media practices and communication systems provide an enduring prism through which to understand how Chinese politics work. By contrast, for media and communication scholars, politics is one of the main domains in which various media and communication forms, practices and policies can be fruitfully explored. While political scientists and media scholars share this common interest, they tend to pursue different research agendas, adopt different methods of data-gathering and analysis, and at times seem to speak a different language. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that political scientists and media scholars may even have different understandings of what constitutes valid empirical data or worthy lines of inquiry and which theoretical models and paradigms are fashionable or out of date. Because of this divide, the two groups of scholars unearth different findings and reach different conclusions. This leads to the curious situation in which scholars of the same field – but in different disciplines – talk past each other, or worse still, look upon each other's work with deep suspicion.

While gulfs understandably exist across disciplinary boundaries, they are, to a great extent, avoidable. In fact, collaboration between the disciplines of anthropology and media studies has provided some shining examples of cross-fertilization bearing intellectual fruit (e.g. Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002). And there are signs that as the Chinese media are becoming increasingly regionalized and localized, it is becoming possible to explore the analytic perspectives developed in the field of geography to make sense of the new developments in scale, place and space (Sun and Chio 2012). Given this fruitful collaboration, there are certain to be advantages in exploring dialogue between political scientists and media scholars.

So where do the two fields differ? Political scientists see the Chinese media as just one aspect – albeit an important one – of China's political system; for communications scholars, the focus is on the media itself and how it is nestled within the Chinese economy and society (Keane and Sun 2013). This differing emphasis determines which areas the two camps tend to investigate. Political scientists,

inclined toward investigating state–society relations and the loci of power, often focus on state control and media resistance. This focus in turn shapes what questions are asked, what data are gathered and what methods are used. For example, political scientists' recent spate of studies on the emerging electronic media (including special issues in *Political Communication* [2011], *China Quarterly* [2011] and the *Journal of Communication* [2012]) generally adopt a "cat and mouse" frame to investigate the tensions between the party-state's desire for control and the efforts of a few select netizens to circumvent that control. With this approach, political scientists see the media as a potential check on arbitrary state power, often adopting the normative underlying assumption that the media can serve as a relatively neutral "fourth estate" (Keane and Sun 2013).

Media and communication scholars concerned with political communication are equally interested in the question of the power, behaviour and impact of the party-state, but the object of their analysis is generally not politics *per se*. Rather, communications scholars focus on the assemblage of institutional practices, technologies, money, media texts, practitioners and consumers, and how particular arrangements of these elements shape the media power structure and ultimately the meaning of political messages. But there is a further internal division of labour within media studies: political economists "follow the money" through funding arrangements, ownership, ratings and regulation, while critical media and cultural scholars trace power (in the Foucauldian sense) through a dialectical relationship between the "culture of production" and "production of culture". Rather than focusing on propaganda and control, media and communications scholars are more concerned with the quotidian nature and cultural practice of media production and the socialization and (de)politicization of individuals through media consumption.

Most media scholars tend to shy away from adopting a control-vs.-resistance lens. In fact, cultural studies as a discipline seems to have long reached a consensus that since there is no control that is total and no resistance that is complete, it may make more sense to talk about the effects of the media on supporting or fracturing ideology and hegemony. Media scholars are just as interested as political scientists in the possibilities of new media and technologies, but the former largely focus on the ways in which these new tools are used to serve political and social ends.

Since there is a plethora of media forms (including journalism, entertainment, service information and advertising), media scholars are cautious about ascribing behaviour to the media in general (for example, referring to "the media", "journalists", and so on). Similarly, this critical lens is not limited to looking at the news, the public sphere, political blogs or *weibo* discussion topics – as political scientists tend to do – for clues of change or continuity in political communication practices. Instead, media scholars tend to look for hidden ideological – rather than overtly political – messages, and are committed to showing that the seemingly apolitical are often in fact deeply ideological. Put simply, while political scientists look for evidence of political control and political resistance, media scholars engage in finding traces of depoliticization.

These differences are manifest in how scholars from both disciplines interact with and cite each other. A search for "Chinese media" as a topic in the ISI Web of Knowledge, for example, reveals 333 articles published between 2000 and early 2012, with the number rising steadily – almost exponentially – in recent years.

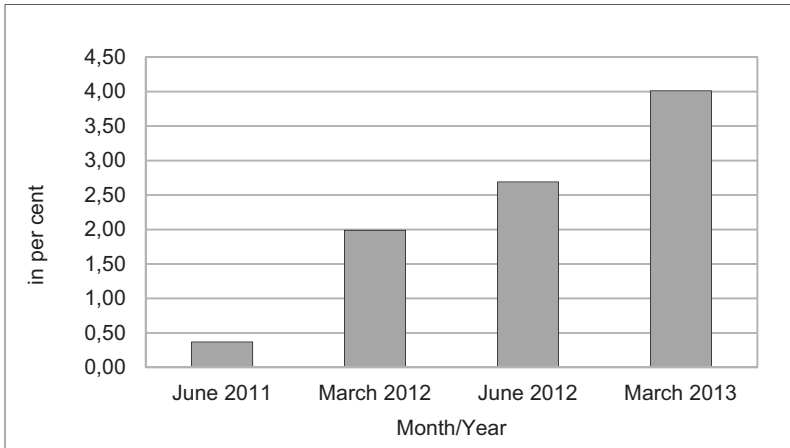Figure 1:  Articles on the Chinese Media
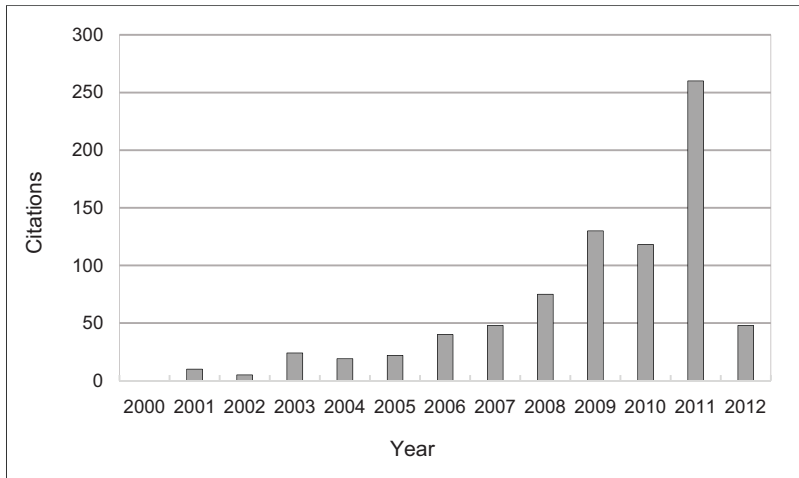


Note:      2012 articles represent only the first part of the year.
Source:    ISI Web of Science (numbers are approximate).

These 333 articles, not surprisingly, are mostly divided between communication and political science, with sociology a distant third. Allowing for the fact that an individual paper can fall into multiple categories, approximately two-thirds of these papers are communication-based, and another quarter are based in political science. But apart from some early, groundbreaking articles that are cited in roughly this ratio, the citation pattern does not follow this disciplinary breakdown. Political scientists, in particular, seem to ignore most communications papers, as only 12 per cent of the 599 papers that cited these 333 are in political science, compared with nearly 50 per cent in communication. The evidence suggests, in other words, that the disciplinary boundaries are hardening.

Figure 2: Citations of Articles on the Chinese Media



Note: 2012 citations represent only the first part of the year.
Source: ISI Web of Science (numbers are approximate).

Why do these data necessarily indicate a problem? What is the risk in continuing to live in parallel universes? On the one hand, while the political scientists' focus on authoritarian control, dissent and resistance is warranted – China is, after all, an authoritarian regime ruled by the Communist Party – it is increasingly risky to regard China as an exceptional case and to focus more or less exclusively on what makes it an "exception". Colin Sparks (2012), a leading media

studies scholar, has recently urged a move "beyond political communication" towards a "broader perspective" on the Chinese press. Sparks argues that contemporary China bears little resemblance to the classic model of totalitarianism and that there is much more to talk about regarding the Chinese media than just how far journalists can push the boundaries. Political science's narrow approach risks missing important developments outside the overtly political realm that nevertheless can have a broad impact on China's society and politics.

On the other hand, a weakness in much of the media studies scholarship lies in its lack of both critical language and empirical commitment regarding accounting for the impact of the party-state in the production, shaping and interpretation of media content. Zhao Yuezhi (2008), a political economist of Chinese media and communication, conceptualizes the Chinese state as "a contradictory entity and as a site of struggle between competing bureaucratic interests, divergent social forces and different visions of Chinese modernity" (Zhao 2008: 11). Much of this contradiction and complexity is illustrated in her analysis of the economics of the Chinese media, media policy and regulations, and the production of media content (Zhao 2008). However, in a large proportion of research on Chinese media practices, especially in the analysis of popular cultural expressions and entertainment media content, the question of if and how the state functions receives scant consideration. In China, even entertainment options are subtly shaped by party-state intervention, and when media scholars elide China's political environment they risk missing a critical part of the picture. This is particularly so in the post-Mao context, where the adoption of a neoliberal logic is shown to have enriched and strengthened China's authoritarian rule, calling for investigation into how the

> state and the private sphere, government and individuals are engaged in co-production of practices, values, solutions that usually do not have a liberal democratic outcome (Ong and Zhang 2008: 10).

Scholars of the Chinese media often have differing underlying conceptions of the Chinese political system. One school of thought sees the state – "forged in the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist social revolution, with a historically grounded popular base of legitimacy" (Zhao 2008: 177) – as being relatively secure and unwilling to implement systemic political change. Others are more sanguine about the

potential for democratic changes (at least around the margins) while recognizing that the Chinese party-state remains authoritarian and dependent on the propaganda system to maintain its power and legitimacy (e.g. Brady 2008). Both schools, however, are grounded in a historical perspective that builds upon earlier seminal work by scholars like Franz Schurmann (1971), Stuart Schram (1984) and Michael Schoenhals (1992).

Despite this shared commitment to the Chinese media's historical background and trajectory, the disciplinary origins of political science and media studies are an important cause of their divergent focus and approach. Political science as a modern discipline arose in the United States in the late nineteenth century, a product of the Progressive Era's fascination with measuring and quantifying social change. At first concerned primarily with deriving "universal laws", with the start of the Cold War the discipline began to draw more heavily on "area studies" to gain insight into the rest of the world. Even though the field of "China studies" is now populated with Chinese-born as well as Western scholars, its paradigm developed in a particularly Western framework of approaching China first and foremost as a communist, authoritarian regime. Political scientists are interested in the Chinese media and its communication system in part because they offer fertile ground to examine the potential emergence of civil society, the public sphere and democratization. For media scholars, this agenda represents a narrow-minded fixation on topics that have not changed in 30 years despite tectonic shifts in China's underlying media landscape. The reluctance to acknowledge important changes outside political scientists' worldview is exacerbated by a fetish for measuring and counting that strikes many media scholars as misguided or worse.

By contrast, the discipline of media studies, now also inhabited by China-born as well as Western academics, has attracted students from the general field of media studies instead of "China studies". These scholars stand to inherit political communication's more "universal" set of research paradigms, but for many political scientists, this approach risks devolving into a theory-laden exercise in triviality. Topics that are important for media scholars – questions of subjectivity, discourse, identity construction and so on – are seen as "fuzzy": imprecise at best and incomprehensible at worst. At the same time, an overwhelming focus on "universal" theory risks building a Pro-

crustean bed which forces China's empirical realities into an ill-fitting theoretical framework.

The scope of this topical issue is not overly ambitious. We do not claim to be able to illuminate the blind spots of both disciplines, nor we do believe that paradigms, perspectives and approaches formed over decades can be shifted overnight. What we do hope to do, instead, is to create a space whereby scholars from both disciplines can address the same empirical issue. In doing so, we hope contributors will reveal differences and similarities in the ways in which they conceptualize, frame and approach media and communication. The point of departure for this exercise is that students of Chinese media and political communications from different disciplines share a wide range of common concerns, so they may want to avoid the scenario of existing in parallel universes and start becoming more aware of each other's different languages, methods and research agendas. At best, readers end up having an enriched, more nuanced perspective of the Chinese media and political communication. At worst, readers at least become aware that there is more than one way to research the Chinese media.

We have identified "stability maintenance" (维稳, *weiwen*) as the most enduring and salient theme in understanding the political communication in China. The late paramount Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping famously argued that "stability trumps all" (稳定压倒一切, *wending yadao yiqie*), and an obsession with maintaining social stability continues to drive the contemporary CCP. The current regime led by Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang is no exception. It is reported that the PRC now spends tens of billions of dollars on *weiwen* – more, indeed, than on external defence (Tsinghua University 2010). Given the importance of *weiwen* to the CCP, officials use all available resources, from overt state oppression to subtle cultural manipulation, to maintain their goals. Having become both the means and the end, stability – or the threat of instability – has provided justification for oppression, censorship and media inaction. *Weiwen* has taken on a life of its own; it is now an assemblage of discourses, policies, processes and institutions.

Media control, unsurprisingly, is near the top of the agenda. One development of note is what David Bandurski at the University of Hong Kong's China Media Project calls "control 2.0". This strategy involves active manipulation of media and cultural messages to en-

sure that the CCP stays ahead of and helps shape brewing storms; this strategy is proactive rather than reactive. Considering the wide scope of its activities and effects on the media, *weiwen* – including subtle techniques like "control 2.0" – is an important topic for both media scholars and political scientists. For the latter, *weiwen* provides an important window into the party-state's structure, power and concerns. Media and communications scholars, in turn, can examine how the CCP obsession with *weiwen* affects popular rhetoric and consciousness.

## Papers and Themes

Our contributors address and speak to the theme of stability maintenance and Chinese media and communication. The list of questions below, while not exhaustive, is intended to be indicative of a range of concerns:

■   What issues, phenomena and topics in Chinese politics and society support the party-state's means and goals of stability maintenance?

■   What is the role of the Chinese media and communication system in maintaining stability?

■   What media and communication policies, processes and practices are implemented to maintain stability?

■   What aspects of the Chinese media present themselves as important and relevant prisms through which to explore stability maintenance?

■   What kind of model, paradigm, research agenda or approach is most useful and effective in addressing the issue of *weiwen*?

■   How does the CCP's emphasis on *weiwen* affect media and communication in China?

Among the four contributors to this topical issue, two (Sun and Hassid) take a big-picture approach and two (Esarey and Han) zoom in on the language and motivations of particular individuals. While the scope of all four pieces differs, all authors are careful to draw links between particular regulations or individual actions and the stability of the Chinese political system as a whole. They work well together to remind both political scientists and communications scholars of the increasing – and often overlooked – importance that ostensibly apol-

itical media content has in helping the CCP maintain power. As such, these contributions point the way toward future collaborative work and help nudge Chinese media scholarship beyond its disciplinary bailiwicks.

Wanning Sun's contribution, "From Poisonous Weeds to Endangered Species: *Shenghuo* TV, Media Ecology and Stability Maintenance", is intended to set the scene for this topical issue on stability maintenance and media by providing a general context in which the three more empirically based papers are situated. Taking an unorthodox – even somewhat provocative – approach, she argues that media and communication in China can be looked at as an ideological-ecological system. More specifically, she suggests that by exploring the complex relationship and interaction between various media forms, genres and practices in the Chinese media and communication sector, we can arrive at a more nuanced and precise understanding of the relationship between China's media practices and its ongoing objectives for stability maintenance. She concentrates not on the usual dichotomy of control and resistance but instead theorizes that the media as a whole, and especially the mundane, seemingly "apolitical" media, work toward maintaining equilibrium in the system. Her work sees areas of the media like lifestyle advice and consumer information as having "done more for stability maintenance and the party-state's political legitimacy than have news and entertainment" by virtue of their ubiquity and apparent trustworthiness. As such, she brings needed attention to this area and argues that a vibrant and diverse entertainment landscape – albeit one within careful limits – plays a crucial role in maintaining China's stability. Self-help and advice programming are particularly successful in this regard, she argues, as

> these programmes present themselves in such a way to have viewers believe that social issues such as poverty, unemployment, poor health, and so on, can in fact be solved […]. Instead of advocating social change, which might have political and ideological causes and consequences, these programmes present solutions which seem technical and scientific.

By noting the hidden politics in the seemingly apolitical, and by examining the media ecosystem as a whole, this paper takes long strides towards reconciling the divergent media studies and political science worldviews.

Jonathan Hassid's paper, "China's Responsiveness to Internet Opinion: A Double-Edged Sword", looks at how the party-state responds to the public pressure that builds when scandals are revealed. Using data from the international press, this contribution demonstrates that compared to a number of countries around the world, China's government acts unusually quickly to respond to and resolve ordinary citizens' demands for punishment when misdeeds are uncovered online or in the press. In the short run, this high level of official responsiveness to revealed scandal would seem to help China's *weiwen* goals, but in the long run, Hassid argues, this responsiveness might be misplaced. Rather than helping China build a more stable and independent judiciary, such responsiveness might undermine China's fitful progress toward building the rule of law. And instead of helping the people who might need it most (but remain offline), the party-state is showing worrying signs of listening mostly to netizens, a highly elite and circumscribed section of the population. Power holders' responsiveness, in short, might help preserve stability in the short run by endangering it later on.

Ashley Esarey's "Winning Hearts and Minds? Cadres as Microbloggers in China" scrutinizes individual officials and their motivations in choosing to promote official ideology on China's rapidly growing *weibo* (Twitter-like microblog) systems. He concentrates in particular on three mid-level officials from around the country who have become popular on *weibo* for their attempts to engage with government critics. Although clearly inspired by the party-state's desire to "maintain stability", these three official microbloggers find only minimal, fleeting success in convincing their immediate critics. But perhaps these immediate critics are not the true audience? His observation that

> the frequency with which the official microbloggers posted non-political commentary, relative to political content, seemed to reflect a desire to put a human face on propaganda and ideological work

in an effort to seek "the public's empathy, acceptance and support", mirrors Sun's paper in arguing for renewed attention to the systemic impact of even seemingly apolitical media content. Such "soft" stories, they argue, help maintain CCP dominance and are arguably more important in shaping hearts and minds than the official media's uninspiring, and unvarying, boilerplate. All in all, this is a remarkable

snapshot of the motivations and issues facing propagandists in a new world where *weibo* is "a powerful communication tool as well as a medium that could undermine traditional propaganda work".

Finally, Han Rongbin's fascinating "Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China's 'Fifty-Cent Army'", investigates the effect of paid internet propagandists on the discourse of popular internet comment sites. This "fifty-cent army" – so called because they are supposedly paid 50 Chinese cents per post – is mostly recruited among media employees and college students, especially those who demonstrate "loyalty to the party-state and online communication skills". The goal seems to be promotion of party-state interests without using the heavy hand of existing censorship tools. Ultimately, many different party organizations and even large companies engage these paid commentators for "astroturfing", the process of faking a groundswell of public support for political or economic gain. After a novel look at the recruitment, training and rewards of these commentators, Han then looks at the systemic impact these "fifty-centers" might have. While they might be effective in distracting the public or channelling support on particular issues, such success is fleeting.

> The [online commentator] system has increasingly become a liability rather than an asset. It is especially the case when the marks of state propaganda become too obvious,

Han finds. When ordinary netizens can easily detect the official interlopers, the party-state's efforts backfire and create a more confrontational public. In other words, unseen and unnoticed propaganda is often the most effective, and we hope other scholars continue to examine this fruitful area.

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