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Media Oversight in Non-Democratic Regimes: The Perspectives of Officials and Journalists in China

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Maria Repnikova joined us as the 2014-2015 PARGC Postdoctoral Fellow from the University of Oxford, where she completed a DPhil in political science and was a Rhodes Scholar and a Wai Seng Senior Scholar. Maria's ongoing research focuses on state-media relations in China, drawing some comparisons to Russia and the Soviet Union. In the past, she has researched Chinese migration to Russia as a Fulbright Scholar, and the political aspects of China's journalism education. She has published articles in academic journals and popular publications including *Wall Street Journal*, *Al Jazeera English*, and Russia's *Vedomosti*. Maria also has professional experience in the media and communications sector as the Overseas Press Club fellow for Reuters agency in Beijing, and an intern for Google communications team in London and Moscow. She speaks fluent Mandarin, Russian and Spanish.

As a PARGC fellow, Maria is reworking her doctoral dissertation into a book manuscript, as well as examining China's evolving approaches to crisis communication and comparing the media environment in China and Russia in more detail. Her research combines a multidisciplinary theoretical grounding with extensive field research, filtered through a unique comparative vantage point enabled by language abilities and knowledge of the history and politics of

countries and issues under study. Maria's work thus embodies fundamental PARGC values.

At PARGC Press we are thrilled to present PARGC Paper 3, "Media Oversight in Non-Democratic Regimes: The Perspectives of Officials and Journalists in China," based on a PARGC Postdoctoral Colloquium Maria gave during her residence at the Annenberg School. Grounded in more than 100 interviews and textual analysis of official discourse, PARGC Paper 3 breaks new ground.

Whether following the comparative systems approach or any variation of globalization theory, work in global media studies often pivots around magnified distinctions between democratic and non-democratic contexts that ignore nuances in the interplay of power and influence. In contrast, by focusing on investigative reporting—a practice commonly associated with liberal democracies—in contemporary China, which is often associated with censorship, Maria blurs widely held assumptions about distinctions between media in various kinds of democracy and autocracy. Her conclusions have broad relevance to the comparative study of media practices and accountability worldwide.

Media Oversight in Non-Democratic Regimes: The Perspectives of Officials and Journalists in China

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*This paper attempts
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investigative reporting—in
a regime most renowned
for censorship and
pervasive propaganda—
contemporary China.*

In comparing media landscapes and practices in democratic and non-democratic regimes, a popular projection is that of a binary vision of free versus not free, sanctioning versus censorship, and objectivity versus propaganda. Global media assessment indices, which rank and sort countries into different categories of media freedom reinforce the imagery of a stark disconnect between media practices in democratic and authoritarian contexts. In contrast to democratic regimes, which populate the “free” category, authoritarian regimes, such as China, Belarus, and Zimbabwe, fall into the unfree domain and are generally associated with harsh media environments and a lack of any independent or critical voices (Freedom House Rankings 2013)¹. The frequent focus of Western media on censorship and harassment of journalists in authoritarian regimes further highlights the gap between media practices in democratic and non-democratic contexts. In the latter, the media is projected as being entirely dominated by an all-powerful coercive state apparatus, not leaving space for alternative discourses.

This paper attempts to challenge the clashing imagery of the media in democratic and non-democratic regimes by examining a journalism practice generally associated with democratic contexts—investigative reporting—in a regime most renowned for censorship and pervasive propaganda—contemporary China. China is continuously placed at the bottom of the international press rankings. In 2014, the World Press Freedom Index ranked it as 175th out of 180 countries. As such, it is considered as an extremely challenging place to be a journalist, working for either domestic or international media.

I start out by presenting an overview of the scholarship on media and accountability in democratic and authoritarian contexts, followed by a close look at the notion and the practice of investigative journalism in China, with an emphasis on the Hu-Wen era (2002-2012). The discussion of the China case draws on 13 months of field research in Beijing, including over 100 interviews with investigative reporters, media scholars and officials, as well as in-depth textual analysis of the party's official discourse on the accountability role of the media in the Chinese political context.

This paper demonstrates how a limited governance role for the media, involving investigative reporting, has emerged in China in the past three decades, amidst the repressive environment. I explain the context in which investigative journalism has evolved, and illuminate its dominant characteristics, as understood by Chinese officials and practicing journalists in the Hu-Wen period. The paper concludes by drawing implications from the China case for comparative analysis of media's accountability role in non-democracies, as well as across political spectrums. It draws attention to the increasingly blurry lines between media practices in democracies and non-democracies by not only demonstrating that watchdog media can function in the latter, but also by arguing that political pressures on the media are present across political contexts.

Media and Accountability in Democratic Contexts

The practice of investigating power and holding authorities to account is closely linked to democratic and accountability theories. Democracy theorists tend to consider the media's capacity to expose governance failures or to serve as an "accountability mechanism" as its predominant role in democratic systems. From classic to contemporary writings on democracy, the media is described as the guardian or the "watchdog" of political processes (Mill 1863; Graber 2009, 3; Patterson 1994).

The works discerning different mechanisms of accountability place media, alongside civil society, into the vertical or the bottom-up category, associated with exposure of official misconduct (see Diamond, Morlino, and Meeting 2005; Schedler 1993), and occasionally also with enforcement of policy change. Most studies emphasize the exposure itself as the key feature of investigative reporting, enabled by the presence of free press. Referring to the quality of accountability in Spain, for instance, Lopez-Pintor and Morlino (2005, 100) argue that by exposing military threats and corruption, investigative journalism played an important role in strengthening democratic practices in the 1980s. In analyzing the quality of political accountability in contemporary Bangladesh, Ganguly (2005) similarly argues that the feisty free press, fearlessly critiquing the state, can be an important accountability mechanism, though he does note that the government has been blocking the media from digging into the most sensitive issues.

The accountability literature also theorizes about the occasional capacity of media investigations to alter political processes by either activating horizontal accountability, damaging officials' reputation, or facilitating their deliberation of issues of concern to the public. Peruzzotti and Smulovicz (2000), in analyzing the dynamics of accountability in contemporary Latin America, for instance, argue that initial media exposés can lead to judicial hearings and other institutional processes, which can enforce punishment. Schedler (1993) attributes the enforcement of accountability in part to the official reputation damage through the media: "Concerning the nature of possible sanctions, in the world of politics, the destruction of reputation through public exposure represents one of the main tools of accountability" (19). Waisboard (2000) refers to this phenomenon as the "politics of shaming" (236), whereby media reports can force politicians out of office. Proress and Cook (1992), in contrast, point to the constructive dimension of media investigations as having the potential to influence officials to deliberate on issues raised in media investigations, calling it the "deliberative policy effect" (23).

The scholarship on media and accountability in democratic contexts, therefore, suggests that investigative or watchdog journalism plays an important role in democratic politics, being a significant element in the wider web of accountability processes, which activate the "answerability" dimension of accountability, monitoring and questioning those in power, and at the same time occasionally has an "enforcement" effect, facilitating negative sanctions against those accused of misconduct (Schedler 1993).

Media and Accountability in Non-Democratic Contexts: Between Democracy and a Hard Place

When it comes to non-democratic contexts, there are two opposing views dominating the debates on the role of more outspoken media in political processes: that of a democratizing force and a tool of authoritarian governments. Given the association of watchdog media with free press and democratic governance, it is not surprising that the more independent media in authoritarian contexts are often linked to democratization and broader political liberalization. Studies ranging from post-Communism transition in Russia and Eastern Europe to democratization in Asia and most recently the revolutions in North Africa, argue that more independent media, exposing governance failures, has contributed to democratic transitions (McFaul 2004; Pei 1994; Khamis and Vaughn 2011). While media is most commonly viewed as an additional factor reinforcing transformations already under way via elections or large-scale protests (Bunce and Wolchik 2011), some works also position it at the heart of democratic transitions (Price et al. 2003; Ojo 2007). Linkages between liberal media and democracy are also prominent in development discourse, with media assistance being advocated by NGOs and government agencies as being conducive to better governance outcomes, which could then indirectly facilitate political openings.² In popular discourse, critical voices in non-democratic regimes are often automatically labeled as dissidents, and thereby, portrayed as working towards altering the political status quo.³ While there are also a number of works questioning the importance of the media in democratic transitions (Jebril, Stetka, and Loveless 2013; Morozov 2009; McConnell and Becker 2002), the associations between the presence of more liberal media and political liberalization continue to reverberate in scholarly and in public discourse.

New scholarship has emerged in the past decade arguing that more outspoken media, including investigative outlets and social media, can be conducive to authoritarian resilience, as regimes can use those as a façade of tolerance while minimizing their influence on policy-making and on public attitudes.

At the same time, new scholarship has emerged in the past decade arguing that more outspoken media, including investigative outlets and social media, can be conducive to authoritarian resilience, as regimes can use those as a façade of tolerance while minimizing their influence on policy-making and on public attitudes. Theoretical works on hybrid regimes that combine limited democratic institutions with authoritarian rule refer to the presence of some liberal media as part of the authoritarian toolkit, deployed by governments to promote an image of openness and tolerance, while in reality carefully isolating them from governance apparatus (Levitsky and Way 2010; Balzer 2003). Recent works on social media in non-democratic contexts also highlight that far from being a democratizing agent, new media platforms can bolster authoritarian rule, as skillful rulers can manipulate them for surveillance purposes, as well as impose new censorship on the more critical voices (Morozov 2012; Kalathil and Boas 2002).

The seemingly opposing views with regard to outspoken media under authoritarianism in fact present two facets of the same discourse primarily interested in media's implications for democratic outcomes. These works, however, tell us little about the governance dimensions of investigative reporting and the nature of its practices in authoritarian contexts. Can investigative journalism under authoritarian rule contribute to bottom-up accountability akin to its functions in democratic contexts introduced earlier? Specifically, how do authorities and media practitioners perceive the role of investigative reporting in non-democratic regimes, beyond abstract notions of

democratization and authoritarian resilience? The following discussion examines these questions through the case study of China, starting with the background on the emergence of investigative journalism in the Chinese context.

Investigative Journalism in China: Background

The practice of investigative journalism has managed to emerge and even flourish within China's state-dominated media landscape (Tong 2011; Zhao and Sun 2007). This development is in large part due to the immense economic and societal transformation that took place in China in the past three decades, following the reforms and opening up initiated by Deng Xiaoping in late 1970s.

As for the economic impetus, the state-supported partial commercialization of the media in the 1980s has allowed for the emergence of more critical outlets and the golden age of watchdog journalism in the 1990s (Tong 2011). The state-initiated economic reform of the media sector starting in the late 1970s with deregulation and partial privatization of the media industry facilitated the creation of a diverse, competitive and decentralized media landscape, conducive to investigative journalism.

Aiming to promote more competition and economic dynamism in the media sector, the state issued more media licenses, encouraging entrepreneurship, and went from fully financing all media to remaining the majority stake-holder but allowing for up to 49% of private investment in the sector (Stockmann 2012). As a result, the media sector, particularly print media, has exploded, with newspapers expanding from 69 in 1979 to 1,937 in 1997 (Wu 2000).

The sharp competition for advertising revenue and readership accompanying the expansion of the media sector inspired some media outlets to feature investigative and more critical coverage to differentiate themselves and to attract readership. In fact, the publications that became reputable for professional in-depth and investigative coverage are also the more commercialized ones, enjoying high circulation and advertising revenues. *Nanfang Zhoumo*, for instance, one of China's feistiest newspapers from mid-1980s to mid-2000s, has a circulation of over one million and advertising revenue exceeding one billion yuan (Gang and Bandurski 2011) while *Caijing*, another investigative outlet based in Beijing, made it into the top 10 magazines with the highest advertising revenue in 2006 (Scotton 2010). The financial success of investigative publications further helped attract more media professionals to this genre, as they began to perceive it as a stable career, not only as an advocacy initiative (Tong and Sparks 2010).

Decentralization of the media, which accompanied its expansion, also enabled more investigative reporting. In the reform era, the media shifted from being mainly concentrated in the capital to spreading across the country to other cities, with the majority of newspapers now being published at the provincial or municipal levels (Wu 2000). This shift meant that the central press was no longer the sole authority on many subject areas, and new opportunities emerged for provincial media to examine governance issues at a distance from higher authorities. Some of the media outlets most renowned for critical coverage, including *Nanfang Zhoumo* and *Nanfang Dushibao*, are based far away from the center, in the southern Guangzhou province. Decentralization also incited

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investigations of governance failures outside of one's home province—a practice known as extra-territorial supervision or *yidi jiandu* (Svensson, Sæther, and Zhang 2013). The Guangzhou-based newspapers, for instance, frequently cover issues in other provinces to bypass political pressures from local authorities.

Other than the structural economic changes within the media industry, the dramatic societal transformations taking place in the 1980s have incited the practice of investigative reporting. Journalists' pursuit of social justice, which some scholars refer to as part of a larger movement of societal activism, attempting to shed light on and contribute to solving these emerging problems in a fast transforming Chinese society. Stark inequality and a multitude of societal issues, ranging from uneven health care provision to local-level corruption, emerged in China alongside with unprecedented economic growth. Observing and partaking in these societal changes has inspired some journalists to investigate the governance failures as a way to promote social justice.

Though less examined than the economic and societal factors, the party-state's limited support for media oversight has also been an important factor conducive to the development of investigative journalism. The following section analyzes the official discourse on investigative reporting, namely how the party-state envisions its role within China's political system, followed by a discussion on the perceptions and practices of China's investigative journalists.

Investigative Reporting as a Limited Governance Mechanism: An Ambiguous Official Endorsement

While the party-state has never endorsed press freedom or the notion of the media as the “fourth estate” in the Western liberal sense, it has promoted a “homegrown” concept of the media's accountability mechanism in the reform era – *yulun jiandu* (舆论监督). The English meaning of this concept is not immediately obvious. Directly translated as public opinion supervision, it has also been interpreted as “supervision by public opinion” (Brenderbach 2005, 32), amongst other meanings. While the term itself does not invoke the media directly and mainly refers to the relationship between the public and the state, it has been most frequently used in reference to the media in the discourse of Chinese authorities, media scholars and journalists, and has therefore become understood as a distinct media role. As Zhao and Sun (2007) argue with regard to the meaning of *yulun jiandu*, “a prevailing definition connotes the use of critical media reports to supervise government officials” (300). A more comprehensive definition I have used in my work defines *yulun jiandu* as “the media's oversight and supervision of political authorities by conveying public opinion” (Repnikova 2014, 75). The media should channel public grievances and demands to officials as a means of supervising governance.

The first prominent mention of this concept in the official discourse appeared in 1987, in a speech delivered by Zhao Ziyang, China's former Premier, at the Thirteenth Party Congress. He endorsed the media's supervision role as one instrument for improving the party's governance, as he stressed the importance of “supporting the mass criticisms of the Party and the government's shortcomings and mistakes” and advised the media to help “fight against all kinds of unhealthy practices”

(Chen 2004, 24). More official endorsements of media supervision followed in the 1990s, as *yulun jian du* presented a timely mechanism, along with strengthening the rule of law and top-down supervision of local officials, for addressing local-level official corruption and other social problems that emerged from rapid economic growth in the previous decade (Zhao 2000). An explicit official support for media supervision was manifested in high-level praises of investigative reporting. In 1997, Premier Li Peng commended China's Central Television Program, *Jiaodian Fangan* (Focus) on its effective exposure of corruption (Zhao 2000) and in 1998, Premier Zhu Rongji, during his visit to the program, publicly noted that it represents an ideal of the media's supervision, aggressively battling corruption without endangering the legitimacy of the party-state (Brenderbach 2005). That same year, the head of China's Supreme Court, Xiao Yang, advocated for media's supervision of the courts to enhance horizontal accountability (Zhao 2000).

In the past decade, under the Hu-Wen leadership, there were no such high-level direct public endorsements of investigative reporting. The media's exposure of official wrongdoings appeared to conflict with the state's promotion of "harmonious society," and the authorities have become more sensitive to criticism due to rising societal discontent, as manifested by a high frequency of protests (Tong 2011). At the same time, my in-depth analysis of the official discourse on media policy in the past decade, as well as interviews with media regulating officials in Beijing, show that an implicit support for *yulun jian du* still featured in the official discourse under Hu-Wen's rule. The analysis of *Qiushi*, an official party journal published by the Central Committee found 308 articles mentioning the term *yulun jian du* from 2002 to 2012⁴ and interviews with officials concerning the political role of the media in contemporary China revealed the officials' frequent mention of *yulun jian du* as one of the roles the media should play in China's political system.

An analysis of the official speeches, articles and interviews in the past decade found that *yulun jian du* is framed as a party-led accountability mechanism, aimed at facilitating the work of higher authorities, not at combating or questioning the system at large. *Yulun jian du* is often discussed in the context of other accountability mechanisms, including supervision by law, inner-party supervision, and other channels for facilitating lower-level accountability. Given the fragmented nature of China's political system, which some scholars refer to as "fragmented authoritarianism," (Lieberthal 1992, 1) and the continuous challenge for the center to enforce policies at the lower levels, media supervision, amongst other mechanisms, is aimed at mitigating these frictions in policy-making (Zhang 2010). A typical example of such discourse is the following excerpt from *Qiushi* journal, incorporating the mention of *yulun jian du* into the broader arguments on accountability: "Integrate supervision resources, broaden supervision channels...bring into play the function of *yulun jian du*, join forces in strengthening the entire supervision system" (Zhang 2010, 16). The media, therefore, is integrated into the wider web of supervision mechanisms, overseen by the party-state. Moreover, according to expert interviews, the media's supervisory role is only deemed as effective when acting in conjunction with the party's work. As the Dean of the Government School at Nankai University, who is frequently involved in training party officials, remarked in a personal interview: "If media's supervision is combined with that of the central

authorities, only then it is likely to bring about some change. *Yulun jiandu* is endorsed by authorities only as part of the larger system driven by the party-state, it has never been envisioned as acting in isolation from it or as being entirely independent” (Tianjin, August 8, 2012).

More specifically, *yulun jiandu* is meant to facilitate positive social change through constructive investigative coverage, meant not only at revealing the failures but also at incorporating suggestions for future improvement and transmitting a hopeful sentiment. In other words, investigative journalism, as understood by party officials is far from mere exposés of power abuse discussed in the context of democratic systems, but more of in-depth and careful investigations into problems already of interest to the party-state. Such reporting should be solutions-oriented and “forward-looking,” rather than purely destructive and critical.

The term *jianshexing*, which directly translates as “constructive,” appears in most official accounts of the media’s supervisory role. “Actively launch *yulun jiandu* that is scientific, lawful and constructive,” writes the head of the Propaganda Department of Fujian province (Tang 2008). “We allow critical reporting to take place in China,” commented the Director of the News Coordination Department at *People’s Daily*, “It just has to be constructive, emphasizing progress despite the difficulties,” he added (Beijing, August 4, 2012). This association between supervision and progress also widely resonates in Chinese textbooks on in-depth reporting and journalism ethics (Repnikova 2009).

Closely linked to idea of contributing to progress is the notion of transmitting a hopeful sentiment. Official statements and interviews allude to the importance of incorporating a positive spin into negative reports, as well as exercising a degree of restraint in expressing criticism, in order to convince the readers that the problems are solvable. A number of official reports on *yulun jiandu* encourage journalists’ use of judgment in reporting negative phenomena, to ensure that it doesn’t compromise political stability (Nan 2005; Zhao 2005). As one tactic for maintaining balanced coverage, the editor-in-chief of Xinhua News Agency, stresses the use of positive reports to offset negative ones in his discussion of *yulun jiandu* (Nan 2005).

A characterization of constructive supervision by public opinion by a Tsinghua University journalism professor (Beijing, November 5, 2009) further showcases the fusion of hopeful and socially conscious reporting:

If very negative reports on sensitive issues are published in the press, then they should still ensure to incorporate some positive aspects of society. If reports say that there is no hope and the society wouldn’t transform in a positive direction, then that’s really not good...media should play a double role of watchdog and a government’s voice: it should hold it accountable but also work in cooperation with government in helping society progress...media should be efficient in developing our society.

The key message in this interview is that media practitioners should work towards the higher objective of societal progress by performing a tricky dance of uncovering what needs fixing on the one hand, while upholding public morale and political stability, on the other. Other interviews with scholars and officials confirmed this sentiment and the two-fold expectation laid on journalists attempting to practice investigative reporting in the Chinese context.

While serving as one of the party's governance mechanisms, therefore, investigative journalism is also framed as inseparable from the mainstream role of the media in the past decade, which is that of guiding public opinion, or *yulun yindao* (舆论引导). This media role presents a more sophisticated version of propaganda, "less focused on suppressing negative news coverage and more concerned with spinning news in a direction favorable to the leadership" ("How Officials Can Spin the Media" 2013). The appropriate practice of *yulun jian du* is meant to strengthen the party's capacity to guide public opinion both in the long-term and in the short-term. In the long-term, by helping the party resolve problems, media investigations also boost its credibility, which in turn can help it better direct public opinion to follow official initiatives. A more responsible government is likely to exude more confidence and a wider public following than a government oblivious to societal concerns. "Practice shows that the more effective *yulun jian du*, the more *yulun yindao* can win public confidence," writes a high-ranking propaganda official in Gansu province (Zhou 2010, 21). In the immediate sense, *yulun jian du* coverage can contribute to soft propaganda by showcasing how thorny societal issues are being recognized and are in the process of being addressed by party officials. The fact that many official statements subdue the role of *yulun jian du* under the key function of guiding public opinion further highlights that investigative reporting should conform to wider propaganda initiatives. In his famous media address at *People's Daily* in 2008, Hu Jintao implicitly alluded to investigative reporting as an element of news propaganda work. "News propaganda work should... persist in correctly guiding public opinion... it should also enhance healthy societal atmosphere, report on societal affairs and public opinion, investigate public sentiment and strengthen *yulun jian du*," he stressed (Hu 2008, 56). Hu notes the importance of this media role in the broader context of directing public opinion and propaganda, but does not elaborate on specific dimensions of *yulun jian du*.

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This leads us to the importance of ambiguity as a feature in the party-state's endorsement of investigative reporting. As already alluded to above, the specific functions, expectations, and limitations on investigative journalism are not clearly spelled out in official statements. From the very choice of the term for defining the media's accountability role, to the loose positioning of the media in the wider governance system, to the vague description of the problems journalists are meant to be solving, and the complex fusion of journalists' responsibility to investigate and assist the party-state—the authorities maintain a notable degree of fluidity in their limited endorsement of media supervision. The party's resistance in institutionalizing media freedom in the past three decades further highlights its clear preference for maintaining flexible contours for media supervision.

The official ambiguity with regard to the media's supervisory role seems to be in part intentional, allowing for authorities to shift gears and engage with media investigations as it suits their immediate objectives and the political atmosphere. Whereas in the 1990s there was a more direct

official call for media supervision to battle corruption, for instance, in the 2000s, the endorsement was milder and more integrated into the wider system of accountability and guidance of public opinion. And in the last few years, under Xi, there has been less emphasis on the media in contrast to reform of the legal system, which may be linked to Xi's attempt to recentralize power or it could be reflective of his different outlook on the role that the media should play in China's political system. Longer observation is needed to distill Xi's perceptions of *yulun jiandu*, but immediate distinctions are already notable. Moreover, even within a given leadership cycle, there are periods of more loosening and tightening when it comes to opportunities for investigative journalism. During politically sensitive events, such as leadership summits, or crises, for instance, the space for investigations tends to tighten, and then expand again once the risks of political instability appear to subside.

Looking back on the past two decades, the authorities have cautiously and loosely endorsed some media supervision, but strictly as a party-led mechanism, integrating investigative reporting into the official governance apparatus and into the wider media policy of guiding public opinion. Journalists are granted an ambiguous consultative role within the system, meant to enhance governance and thereby implicitly prolong the party's rule. The official support for media supervision, therefore, takes on a fluid character, as manifested by its ambiguous and non-linear discourse on *yulun jiandu*. The next section examines whether and how the official framing of investigative reporting is reflected in the perceptions and practices of China's media practitioners engaged in investigative reporting.

Investigating Power: The Journalists' Perspective

China's investigative journalists represent a diverse group, ranging from those working at the more liberal commercialized outlets, known for in-depth and investigative coverage, such as *Nanfang Media Group*, *Caijing* and *Caixin*; journalists carrying out specific investigative coverage for more mainstream and even official outlets, including *Beijing News* and *China Youth Daily*; journalists producing the so-called "internal materials" (*neican*) at *Xinhua News*; and independent, retired, and freelance journalists combining investigations with other forms of journalism. While the scope of their investigations and readership differ, these media professionals are all engaged in some form of in-depth reporting, focused on contentious governance and social issues.⁵

During interviews with a wide range of investigative reporters from the groups mentioned above over multiple trips to China from 2008 to 2012, I found that their perceptions of their political role tend to reflect the high-level party statements discussed in the previous section. Journalists position their work within the existing political framework, as they aspire to constructive and solutions-oriented investigations aimed at improving governance.

Specifically, China's investigative journalists express concern for the societal impact of negative reporting and strive to situate uncovered failures in the broader context of socioeconomic and political change. One investigative journalist interviewed in Beijing, for instance, stressed his interest in "contributing to societal progress," admitting that he considers the potential influences of his

reports on political stability, and thereby tends to balance out negative exposes with suggestions for fixing the problems (Beijing, July 12, 2012). A well-known editor of *Caijing* and now *Caixin* magazine further explains how the type of investigative reporting needed in China differs from that in the West (Beijing, July 20, 2012):

I think Western understanding of good watchdog journalism is often primarily focused on exposing and explaining problems. In China—a country undergoing a complex transition—the reporting most valuable is the kind that contains balanced and constructive criticism. Beyond reporting facts, we need to think through how to solve issues, how to move forward—that kind of in-depth yet thoughtful investigative journalism is more likely to impact China’s societal development.

The ideas featured in the interviews are also reflected in journalists’ writings. My analysis of investigative coverage of sensitive events, ranging from the Wenchuan earthquake to Beijing floods of 2012 and ongoing mining accidents, found that balanced and constructive tone features in most investigative reports (Repnikova 2014). The articles examined incorporated both the journalists’ suggestions of potential solutions to the problems exposed, and discussion of official actions to be undertaken, channeling a hopeful sentiment to the readers. In the case of the Wenchuan earthquake, for instance, the media investigations exposed local-level corruption that contributed to the collapse of many schools during the earthquake and the deaths of over five thousand students, but also included suggestions for how better supervision over school safety could be enacted and some hopeful mentions of reconstruction already under way (Repnikova 2013). Some reports emphasize constructive advice so much that they resemble analytical advisory briefs as opposed to journalistic articles. The following excerpt from an in-depth report by *Caijing* magazine on school safety demonstrates the seriousness with which Chinese journalists attempt to advocate solutions, often citing experts to substantiate their arguments:

Many experts interviewed by Caijing believe that the top priority besides incorporating more market mechanisms, is to establish a strong supervision and accountability link. On the one hand....construction companies and government has to undertake responsibility for quality supervision. On the other hand, when it concerns public engineering projects, the public should be endowed with the right to information access and supervision authority. That way there would be multiple levels of supervision in place to effectively monitor the quality of the constructions. As soon as a problem is discovered, one can promptly employ the accountability mechanisms—this is the only way to solve China’s construction crisis (Zhang, Cheng, and Yang 2008).

The very emphasis of most investigative reports on local-level issues presents another facet of constructive criticism, as it is aimed at showcasing manageable, relatively small-scale governance failures to the central state. As one of the interviewees explained (Beijing, August 12, 2009), media investigations are aimed at fostering bottom-up accountability:

Yulun jiandu provides central authorities with a small window into societal problems, which they otherwise may not see. For instance, in a recent case of successful investigative reporting, our paper exposed the mistreatment by local officials of citizens coming to Beijing to file complaints against them. Local officials chased the petitioners all the way to Beijing and placed them into mental asylums. Once we exposed this case of official abuse, the central authorities will be more aware of it and hopefully prevent such mistreatment from happening in the future.

Most of the interviewees gave examples of local-level exposés in discussing their work. Higher level systemic issues or direct criticisms of the political system remain largely untouched by these journalists, though a more forceful satirical discourse does appear on China's social medial platforms like Weibo (Yang 2011). The emphasis on local issues in investigative coverage is confirmed by my analysis of investigative reports, participant observations at investigative journalism conferences in China, as well as by secondary sources on the subject. The analysis of media investigations noted above revealed the predominant framing of local officials as responsible for governance failures. In the case of the Wenchuan earthquake, for instance, education officials were blamed for failing to prevent the tragic deaths of innocent students. In the case of coal mining accidents, corrupt local-level officials were exposed in their dealings with mine managers and their weak implementation of safety supervision (Repnikova 2013). Weak regulation and oversight by central authorities remained largely omitted in these investigations by leading Chinese media. Discussions at the annual *yulun jiandu* conference, which brings together investigative journalists and scholars from across the country, similarly tend to engage with local-level issues, especially corruption, environmental degradation, infrastructure mismanagement, and education and healthcare access inequality, amongst other matters.⁶ The focus of the conference is on “cases” or incidents (*anjian*), alluding to the specificity of the investigated events. Interviews with Chinese media scholars and secondary works on the subject, including those by Tong (2011) and Zhao and Sun (2007/2010), similarly confirm the localized focus of China's investigative reporters.

There may be a number of explanations behind the within-the-system alignment of China's investigative reporters. The immediate factor frequently raised in discussions of the subject is that Chinese journalists are structurally conditioned to work within the system. Even the most commercialized outlets require registration permits from authorities and are 51% owned by the party. By virtue of agreeing to work for established media outlets, therefore, journalists may inadvertently be succumbing to represent the party's interests. At the same time, even journalists working for online outlets not owned by the state still tend to maintain a within-the-system approach to their critical coverage⁷, which suggests that there are other factors at play in shaping their perceptions, beyond the structural dimension of media ownership.

Specifically, the journalists' pragmatic political aspirations, combined with their strong sense of patriotism may explain their cautious approach to investigative reporting. As for political pragmatism, like other Chinese activists, including lawyers and NGO leaders, journalists choose to strategically work within the system, as they see it as the only effective way towards achieving societal change. A number of interviewees noted that tackling the system as a whole would turn them into outsiders, and thereby make them ineffective in China. “I don't want to be a dissident,

observing and critiquing from afar, I want to be actively shaping and remaking this system,” admitted one of the interviewees, a long-time expert on Chinese media and a prominent Chinese intellectual (Beijing, July 5, 2012). Adopting the party-state’s vision of the media as a governance mechanism, therefore, secures a limited space for journalists to make a meaningful contribution. Other studies highlight Chinese investigative journalists’ commitment to social change. Zhao (2000), for instance, talks about the journalists’ “strong sense of social responsibility” (584), and Hassid (2011) argues that advocacy journalism, focusing on promoting change and helping disadvantaged groups, is more prominent in China than the Western-style professional reporting. Some Chinese investigative journalists even partake in social activism beyond their reporting, by collaborating with other activists on specific issues, such as fighting environmental degradation. In a number of workshops I attended between 2008 and 2013, investigative reporters together with NGO leaders and lawyers construed innovative strategies to put pressure on authorities on the issue of the environment. Some journalists have also individually facilitated issue-specific movements with the help of the Internet. Wang Keqin, for instance, one of China’s renowned investigative journalists, has been leading an online NGO to raise money for miners who suffer from lung cancer, while Deng Fei, a former journalist, has launched a successful on-line campaign to supply lunches to village schools. Investigative reporters, therefore, are integrated into the dynamic milieu of China’s social activism.

The specific strategies employed by investigative journalists, particularly the focus on local-level issues, mirror the pragmatic approaches of other activists. Some studies, examining rural protests in China, for instance, conceptualize Chinese activism as that of “rightful resistance,” or “operating near the boundary of authorized channels,” (O’Brien 2006, 2) and taking advantage of the official rhetoric and commitments, as well as the divisions within the state. Like rural activists, investigative journalists practice “rightful resistance,” as they highlight the gaps between the higher-level expectations for governance targets and actual local level achievements. By exposing local failures, journalists strategically align with the higher authorities. Like other activists, therefore, journalists, are “policy entrepreneurs” (Mertha 2009, 995), carefully taking advantage of the fragmented political system.

This pragmatic vision of political opportunity is also likely a byproduct of journalists’ recent experiences with a failed attempt at affecting wider democratic change. The devastating crackdown of the Tiananmen protests of 1989, which lured in many liberal minded journalists, left a shadow on future attempts at challenging the system. Those intellectuals and journalists who remained in China after 1989 have come to understand that compromise and collaboration with authorities rather than overt resistance is the only reasonable way to affect policy change. Even younger journalists who did not experience the Tiananmen incident, are indirectly affected by it, as their lack of exposure to wider media liberalization has likely diminished their expectations for the scope of media influence on political change. Unlike Russian journalists, for instance, who enjoyed a period of wide media opening in the 1990s and an opportunity of actively partaking in and shaping Russia’s democratic transition, Chinese journalists lack such historic reference points, and are therefore likely to remain more comfortable working within the system. Other than the 1989

experience, however, the history of China's investigative journalism in the reform period reflects the within-the-system approach undertaken by reporters today. Even more radical journalists, who were later labeled as dissidents by Western press, such as Liu Binyan, did not challenge the upper echelons of power in their reports. His best known work, "People or Monsters," published in 1978, for instance, carefully examined a case of official corruption in Heilongjiang province (Bandurski and Hala 2010). My conversations with China's media experts and long-time observers of investigative journalism further reveal that the most well-known cases of media oversight since the 1980s still concern local-level issues, not the system at large.

For some journalists, rational objectives are further reinforced by their sense of patriotism, which is indirectly linked to maintaining the existing system, at least in the short-term. In discussing the political system, journalists often allude to the danger of chaos that accompanies democratic transitions. Even when arguing for a democratic system as being more desirable, the journalists would be unable to specify which form of democracy would work in China and how the transition could take place without compromising the wellbeing of the majority of China's citizens. A sentiment of the party's rule as being conducive to the strengthening of the Chinese nation seems to permeate discussions of China's political trajectory. Journalists' implicit and at times explicit support for the party-state echoes the attitudes of other Chinese activists. In his analysis of NGO activists, Spires (2011) found them to be "patriotic progressives" (34), who believe that improving the existing system is the best way to go. And O'Brien and Li's (2006) surveys of rural residents found that they sincerely believe in the benevolent nature of the central state, which represents their interests.

At the same time, while aligning with the party-state's higher objectives for media supervision, China's investigative journalists also engage in some reinterpretation of official concepts and media policies. Specifically, journalists embrace the ambiguity of the concept of *yulun jiandu* and use it as a "discourse strategy" to shield themselves from official criticism. "Using this term provides for a safer way for us to hold conferences and get published..." commented the organizer of an annual investigative journalism conference (Beijing, July 4, 2012). While in public a *yulun jiandu* conference appeals entirely to official objectives, in reality, the participants critically assess the opportunities and the limitations for this media role, including strategies to bypass official restrictions, especially at the local level. Unofficial discussions also include more philosophical debates about the potential for the media to play a role in democratic transitions. In private, some journalists admitted that they prefer terms like "in-depth reporting," and "professionalism" to the party-endorsed concept of *yulun jiandu*. Moreover, unlike the official perception of media investigations feeding into the larger media role of shaping public opinion or carrying out soft propaganda, journalists did not invoke this association in my interviews. They actively distanced themselves from their traditional roles as "mouthpieces" of the party and focused more on adhering to Western journalistic ideals, such as objectivity and professionalism. Many of these interviewees have spent time training in the West, and express pride at their limited independence from the state, seeking respect for their professional achievements. In their view, their reporting is entirely distinct from that carried out by state media outlets like *Renmin Ribao* and *Xinhua*, and they tend to highlight this distinction in

interviews. Reinterpretation of official concepts and media policies also takes place at the level of journalism education, with some more liberal-minded faculty members using official terms, but primarily engaging in Western conceptions of quality journalism practice (Repnikova 2009). Some top journalism departments, such as those of Renmin University and Fudan University, even invite China's boldest investigative journalism to teach and inspire students under the official rubric of *yulun jiandu*.⁸

These attempts at somewhat differentiating their vision of investigative reporting from that advocated by the party-state, however, should not be mistaken for journalists' outright distancing away from the political system. One of the interviewees described Hu Shuli, the editor-in-chief of *Caixin* magazine, and a renowned Chinese media personality, as a "woodpecker." "Her purpose is to transform the system from within, to improve it...Hu Shuli is not a dissident, she is a fairly mainstream persona," her close colleague remarked in an interview (Beijing, November 12, 2010). This description applies to most journalists and editors I have interviewed. They may use official concepts to their advantage and play around with censorship restrictions and official divisions, but their maneuvering still happens within the boundaries of the party-state. Even the most forceful forms of "push back" against the state-created boundaries for media watchdog role, such as the recent anti-censorship protest by *Nanfang Zhoumo* that took place in Guangzhou in 2013, are aimed at local propaganda officials and do not confront the active party-state's guidance over the media more broadly (Repnikova 2013). Explicit critical sentiments targeting the system at large are often expressed on Weibo, as well as on Western social media platforms like Twitter. The investigative journalists working for China's established news outlets, however, refrain from such practices, as they embed themselves in the political system, and see their role as that of enhancing and transforming party's governance.

Conclusions and Implications

This analysis of the official endorsement of the media's watchdog role and the investigative journalists' perceptions of their political aspirations, shows that in the Chinese context, investigative journalism is framed as a fluid party-led governance mechanism. The party-state grants investigative journalists a limited advisory role within the system, namely that of highlighting areas in need of attention at the local level. In addition, the authorities link media supervision to a more effective guidance of public opinion, as media investigations can help boost media credibility and official legitimacy. Chinese investigative journalists, in turn, position themselves as change-makers within the system, guided by a pragmatic vision of political change, an idealistic quest for social justice, and a patriotic sentiment linking their work to the welfare of the nation. Beyond censorship, propaganda and coercion, commonly associated with media-state relations in China, this paper therefore shows how the relationship between journalists and the state can also involve elements of constructive cooperation.

Linking the China case to the wider non-democratic landscape, the analysis in this paper shows how other than serving as a democratization force for the society or a superficial image-making tool for ruling elites, investigative journalism can also play a more subtle, yet still a potentially substantive

governance role in authoritarian regimes. It can serve as a limited feedback mechanism, pushing an authoritarian system to become more aware of and more responsive to public opinion, without attempting at a systemic institutional change.

Limited contrasts with investigative journalism in other authoritarian contexts, however, suggest that China's dynamics might be unique. In contrast to China, for instance, in Russia under Putin, investigative journalism is not integrated into the governance apparatus, but rather operates on the so-called "islands of press freedom"—or is practiced by few liberal media, officially tolerated but isolated from policy-making processes (Lipman 2010). Investigative journalism in Russia takes on a more anti-systemic character, directed at the regime at large, as opposed to solely at local-level failures, but yet these critiques tend to be ignored by high-level officials (Repnikova 2013).

The studies and journalistic observations of Egyptian media under Mubarak also refer to the more investigative media as "opposition" newspapers, suggesting the role of investigative journalism in Egypt was more antagonistic, aimed primarily at exposing governance problems rather than contributing to fixing them. As Black (2008) argues in his account of the media under Mubarak, "The baiting of senior government officials... and the exposure of abuses perpetrated against citizens by the state, particularly torture, has introduced an important level of accountability into the Egyptian polity..." (3).

To determine whether the governance-focused and within-the-system roles of investigative journalism are specific to China requires more in-depth comparisons across the authoritarian spectrum, including the perspectives of both officials and journalists, as well as the comparative analysis of the divergent sources of political legitimacy in non-democratic contexts. Whereas a more populist regime, like Putin's Russia, for instance, may not perceive feedback mechanisms as necessary for remaining in power, China's one-party system combined with a high degree of fragmentation may call for a closer engagement and response to public opinion. This study, therefore, suggests that in examining investigative journalism in authoritarian regimes it may be useful to transcend the democracy versus authoritarian durability dichotomy, and look more closely into how investigative reporting is framed and practiced in a given context, and how it may be connected to the sources of political legitimacy.

The China case further questions the binary perceptions of media contexts in democratic and non-democratic regimes. My analysis shows that despite the apparent differences there is also a degree of convergence in journalism practices across political spectrums. Firstly, investigative journalism—a practice generally associated with democratic and accountability theories—can also evolve in closed political and media settings. Though significantly more restricted, investigative journalism in China, as in Western democratic contexts, is also directly linked to improving official accountability by exposing governance failures and occasionally yielding enforcement of policy change. The enforcement dimension may actually be more present in China, given the interest of the authorities with quickly responding to public concerns (Weller 2008).

The convergence between journalism practices in democratic and non-democratic contexts is notable in some shared challenges that investigative reporters face in the two contexts, including maintaining commercial independence and managing political risks. While applauded in theory, in practice, investigative journalism in the West is under significant pressure.

Moreover, the convergence between journalism practices in democratic and non-democratic contexts is notable in some shared challenges that investigative reporters face in the two contexts, including maintaining commercial independence and managing political risks. While applauded in theory, in practice, investigative journalism in the West is under significant pressure. Some scholars note the prevalence of “market censorship,” with the media having to follow the directives of the market, as opposed to their societal and political responsibilities (Keane 1991, 90). Others refer to the media as “the uncertain guardians,” stressing journalists’ inability to remain objective due to the necessity of maintaining relationships with politicians and other powerful actors (Sparrow 1999). Political pressures have become especially apparent for the US media in light of the Iraq War, and most recently, following the revelations of NSA surveillance. Bennett et al. (2007), for instance, demonstrate how the elite American media has failed to provide a counter frame to the official portrayal of the Iraq war amongst other critical events of the Bush administration. As Mickiewicz (2009) notes in her insightful review of the book, while there were some alternative voices, they failed to filter into the mainstream, as “the government’s efficient spin factory took over the shape of the story and marginalized alternative frames” (934). Lewis, in his recent book, *935 Lies* (2014) also exposes the troubling nexus between the media and politicians during the Iraq war, as he demonstrates the faulty statements used by government officials to justify the war and the media’s complacency with the official rhetoric.

The combination of government’s increasing surveillance and persecution of whistleblowers under the Obama administration has further jeopardized the media’s watchdog function. An extensive report released in 2014 by the American Civil Liberties Union and Human Rights Watch, drawing on interviews with many journalists from top US media outlets, shows that government surveillance has complicated journalists’ work.⁹ Journalists are not only cautious about being accused of spying, but also have increasing difficulty gaining access to insider sources as self-censorship has veiled over the government apparatus. While the political pressures over Chinese journalists are more severe and more institutionalized, therefore, governments’ obstruction of media oversight is also present in democracies, and the nature of control over the media is not absolute, but rather is a matter of degree, or a shade of grey.

Finally, convergence is manifested in ongoing sharing of investigative practices across authoritarian and democratic boundaries. As noted above, many Chinese investigative journalists have spent extensive time training in the West where they engaged with concepts of professionalism, objectivity and media ethics. This means that while their motivations for carrying out investigative reporting may differ from their Western counterparts, some of their tools and practices may be similar. The Chinese notions of constructive and solutions-oriented journalism may also resonate with media professionals in democratic systems. The official ways of containing the media also travel across the borders. The so-called Western ‘spin’ techniques, for instance, have become popular in China in recent years, as party officials have shifted towards guiding public opinion and appearing transparent while still promoting their agenda in the media. Ironically, these strategic

As the world is becoming increasingly interconnected, therefore, it is timely to supplement the existing studies that tend to distinguish the media in democratic versus non-democratic systems, and examine the shared practices, including top-down efforts to diminish media oversight.

communications skills are acquired by many Chinese officials while studying at Harvard, according to my interviews. While critiquing its lack of media freedom, therefore, the US is actively exporting its controversial transparency mechanisms to China.

This in-depth analysis of the notion of investigative journalism in the Chinese context challenges the outdated dichotomy of journalism practices in democratic and non-democratic systems and calls for more research on points of convergence between the two political spectrums. Specifically, it calls for more studies of whether investigative reporting contributes to better policy outcomes in different political contexts, how journalists manage shared challenges of maintaining commercial and political independence, what they may be learning from one another while crossing the boundaries between “free” and “unfree,” and how the forms of surveillance and persecution of whistleblowers may travel across political contexts. As the world is becoming increasingly interconnected, therefore, it is timely to supplement the existing studies that tend to distinguish the media in democratic versus non-democratic systems, and examine the shared practices, including top-down efforts to diminish media oversight.

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Endnotes

- ¹ For critiques of current media ranking mechanisms, see: Monroe E. Price, Susan Abbott and Libby Morgan, *Measures of Press Freedom and Media Contributions to Development: Evaluating the Evaluators* (Peter Lang International Academic Publishers: 2011). My prior work on China's media assistance to Africa also uncovered critiques from local scholars about the capacity of international rankings to capture nuanced dynamics on the ground. See: "China in Africa: A New Approach to Media Development?" (with Iginio Gagliardone and Nicole Stremleau), Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, Oxford University (August, 2010).
- ² International organizations, such as the United Nations, and media development NGOs, such as Internews, frequently make direct linkages between freedom of information and good governance. According to my observations and conversations with media development professionals, good governance frequently implies democratization, even if not directly advocated by their respective organizations. Some reports by development agencies directly link free press to democracy.
- ³ Western press tends to equate any critics of a non-democratic regime with being a dissident. This creates a perception of more liberal voices in the media being interested in democratic outcomes as part of their jobs.
- ⁴ I used the "full-text researching" function, enabled by CNKI, to identify and analyze all articles between 2002 and 2012 that contained the keyword *yulun jiandu*.
- ⁵ Some scholars, like Daniela Stockmann in her recent book, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (Cambridge University Press: 2012), differentiate between three types of Chinese media: commercialized, semi-commercialized and official publications, which are entirely owned by the party-state. While most of the investigative reporting tends to take place within commercialized outlets, some official outlets maintain popular investigative units that attract wide readership. In addition, some journalists investigate issues directly for party officials, known as "internal materials," not disclosed to the general public.
- ⁶ I have attended annual investigative journalism conferences three times in Beijing and Hangzhou and have tracked materials from other conferences in the past six years.
- ⁷ I have observed online critical coverage of crises, including discussions on social media, but primarily news blogs. This conclusion was also confirmed by practicing journalists, including some who attended the PARGC Colloquium on October 23, 2014.
- ⁸ I attended a number of these lectures while carrying out a project on political aspects of journalism education in China from 2007 to 2009.
- ⁹ <https://www.aclu.org/human-rights-national-security/report-finds-nsa-surveillance-harming-journalism-and-law>.



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