2020

[Introduction to] Convenient Criticism: Local Media and Governance in Urban China

Dan Chen

University of Richmond, dchen@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.richmond.edu/bookshelf

Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation

NOTE: This PDF preview of [Introduction to] Convenient Criticism: Local Media and Governance in Urban China includes only the preface and/or introduction. To purchase the full text, please click here.

CONVENIENT CRITICISM

LOCAL MEDIA AND GOVERNANCE
IN URBAN CHINA

Dan Chen

SUNY PRESS

Contents

Illustrations

Introduction

On February 23, 2017, a popular news program airing on the Jiangsu provincial television city channel reported a news story about a misbehaving local official. According to an anonymous hotline call to the program in November 2016, a civil affairs department director surnamed Xu was repeatedly absent from his work at a street committee in the Gulou District of Nanjing, the capital city of Jiangsu. Reporters then started a three-month investigation. They disguised as ordinary citizens in need of government help on pension funds, an issue of Director Xu's responsibility. The excuse from Xu's coworkers was always, "Director Xu is in a meeting." Through meticulous investigation, reporters discovered that Xu had been playing mahjong at a nearby mahjong room extensively during work hours. In the next day's broadcast, on February 24, the news program aired a follow-up report, stating that the street committee had put Xu on an immediate leave and that the discipline commission of the Gulou District had placed him under investigation, as a result of this program's report disclosing Xu's misconduct. That same day, the street committee convened an organization-wide meeting to educate its officials about their duties and disciplines. Why would the Chinese authoritarian state, equipped with a sophisticated media control system, allow such critical reporting to correct official misconduct?

Over four decades of reform and opening, the media landscape in China has been transformed. Media criticism has become a steady component in the political life of government officials and ordinary citizens, despite the notoriously elaborate and effective censorship system. While the informational, supervisory, and propagandist values of media criticism for the party-state have been discussed in the literature, what remains puzzling is the prevalent yet varied levels of *local* critical reporting and

1

1 the subsequent corrective action, as shown in the above example. Why
2 would local officials correct misbehavior instead of lobbying their supe-
3 riors to censor critical reports? What convenience does the supposedly
4 inconvenient media criticism provide, and to whom? Finally, how has the
5 media's role in politics evolved, and what does it mean for governance
6 at the local level?
7   This book addresses these questions by focusing on local televi-
8 sion news programs in China. Having emerged in the late 1990s, these
9 programs pioneered in placing an unprecedented, though comparatively
10 limited, amount of journalistic focus on inept policy implementation
11 and inadequate public service provision at village, township, county,
12 and district levels. Media scholars and practitioners refer to this type of
13 television news as "livelihood news"[1] (民生新闻), indicating the remark-
14 able departure in both style and content from traditional television news
15 programs,[2] which inhabit a formal language to reinforce carefully rehearsed
16 narratives on political ideology, government policy, and high-level leaders.
17 Livelihood news programs, instead, use a colloquial language to enliven
18 ordinary citizens' concerns and grievances. The pioneering livelihood
19 news programs broadcast in Jiangsu, Anhui, Sichuan,[3] and elsewhere
20 were an overnight success, during a time when a series of media reforms
21 substantially elevated the importance of profitability for media outlets.
22 Their enviable ratings propelled other television stations to follow suit.
23 Now, every provincial and municipal television station in China has at
24 least one livelihood news program, operating parallel to their traditional
25 news programs. Having become a prominent voice among the few local
26 media outlets dedicated to covering local affairs, livelihood news programs
27 have grown to shape local narratives on politics and governance and to
28 participate in the local governance process by correcting misbehaving
29 street-level bureaucrats. Their sustained popularity and influence in the
30 past two decades present the unique opportunity to further understand
31 the role of local media in Chinese politics and governance.
32
33
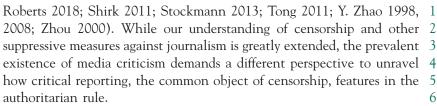34   **Reassessing Media Criticism under Authoritarian Rule**
35
36 In the literature on media politics in China, research into the opaque,
37 fluid, yet exacting rules of media control captures important dynamics
38 in the state-media relationship (Brady 2008; Han 2018; Hassid 2015;
39 Lee 2000; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 2014, 2017; Repnikova 2017a;
40

Roberts 2018; Shirk 2011; Stockmann 2013; Tong 2011; Y. Zhao 1998, 2008; Zhou 2000). While our understanding of censorship and other suppressive measures against journalism is greatly extended, the prevalent existence of media criticism demands a different perspective to unravel how critical reporting, the common object of censorship, features in the authoritarian rule.

Existing studies that examine media criticism, defined as journalistic reports critical of government agencies, policies, or officials, primarily investigate the nationally known newspapers, such as *Southern Weekend*, *Dahe Daily*, and *Southern Metropolis Daily*, through which to illustrate the intricate and volatile dynamics of control, resistance, and maneuver between critical journalists and their censors. This type of shackled watchdog journalism has nonetheless led to consequential policy changes. Prominent examples include reports on the 2003 SARS epidemic that pressured government officials into action and reports on the death of Sun Zhigang in police custody in 2003 that led to the national reform of the extrajudicial detention system. The peak of investigative journalism in the mid-aughts was unprecedented in the seven-decade history of the People's Republic. However, if high impact characterizes investigative journalism during its golden years, then high volatility is its aftermath. The rapidly shrinking space for investigative reporting afterwards has led to a large-scale exodus of critical journalists, damaging the field of investigative journalism.[4] Furthermore, the dynamics of high impact and high volatility do not capture this other dimension in the state-media relationship that enables low-impact but sustainable critical reporting.

Expanding scholarly attention from the national level to local levels[5] and from print media to television[6]—the medium with the highest penetration rate[7] and a high level of credibility[8] in China—this book examines critical reports by local television livelihood news programs and reveals two fundamentally different reporting models, which I refer to as *organic criticism* and *orchestrated criticism*.

Organic criticism stems from a regular journalistic news production process where news leads are sourced from citizens, beat reporters, and others within the state-defined reporting boundaries. Orchestrated criticism, in contrast, is directed by local leaders who assign critical topics to journalists, directly or indirectly, so that the local media can help supervise the subordinate bureaucrats and advance the governance agendas. It is important to note that leader orchestration does not mean that produced critical reports are fake or fabricated; they are real news
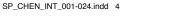
1   reports, though their topics are determined by local leaders. Essentially,
2   local leaders participate in the news production process and to a certain
3   degree play the role of program producer, influencing the selection of
4   news topics.
5   While organic criticism is produced through a bottom-up channel,
6   orchestrated criticism is produced in a top-down fashion. Despite the
7   key differences in their news source and political nature, the two types
8   of critical reporting are often mixed in the broadcast, sharing similar
9   topics and often indistinguishable from the audience's perspective. Both
10 feature citizen grievances and governance problems arising from rapid
11 urbanization, and both follow the narrative that assigns blame to the
12 negligence or incompetence of street-level bureaucrats. For example, air
13 pollution, illegal construction, and food safety issues due to lackadaisical
14 governmental oversight at the grassroots level are common topics in
15 television livelihood news; street-level bureaucrats, who are responsible
16 for the final stage of policy implementation, are the unfailing target of
17 blame. The more serious critical reports expose petty corruption or neg-
18 ligence of duty by local officials, such as the news story about Director
19 Xu. After the initial broadcast, both types of critical reports may lead to
20 follow-up reports that highlight successful resolutions due to correction
21 of misbehavior, ending a critical report on a positive outcome. Opera-
22 tionally, organic and orchestrated criticism can be differentiated through
23 immersive fieldwork that enables investigation of the source and nature
24 of media criticism, discussed further in the following chapters.
25   Given their topics and reporting narrative, television critical reports
26 are not as impactful as the investigative reports published by influential
27 newspapers that led to national policy changes; instead, television criti-
28 cal reports mostly address individual grievances and criticize street-level
29 bureaucrats. With television being the most strictly controlled form of
30 media in China (Shirk 2011, 11), television journalists are unable to
31 liberally examine the policymaking process or to ably analyze governance
32 problems. However, the seemingly low-impact outcome is nonetheless
33 significant at the grassroots level, shown by the media's emerging role
34 in facilitating public service provision and redressing citizen grievances
35 (D. Chen 2017a). More important, the modest scope allows this type of
36 low-impact critical reporting to be sustainable, avoiding the consequence
37 of high volatility that typically follows high impact. Chapter 1 elaborates
38 on how these two types of media criticism are produced and analyzes
39 their connections and distinctions.
40

Existing Explanations of Media Criticism

So why is local television critical reporting allowed and what purpose does it serve? Scholars investigating media criticism in China argue that it provides distinctive values to the authoritarian regime—media criticism collects information on emerging problems and offers consultation for government officials (Huang, Boranbay-Akan, and Huang 2019; Repnikova 2017a; Shirk 2011, 5; Y. Zhao 2004, 181); it supervises local officials and holds them accountable for misconduct (Chan 2002; Cheong and Gong 2010; Lorentzen 2014; Shirk 2011, 5; Zhao and Sun 2007; Zhou and Cai 2020); it diverts citizen blame from the central leadership to the local governments (D. Chen 2017c; Cai 2008; Cai 2015, ch. 6; Yang et al. 2014). Together, these arguments point to the regime's need for information, bureaucratic control, and public opinion manipulation.

On the other hand, excessive media criticism poses a challenge to the authoritarian rule. Susan Shirk (2011, 17) points out that critical reporting is riskier than relying on confidential internal reporting within the bureaucracy to tackle the problem of local noncompliance. Once a problem is reported by the media, the stakes in resolving that problem become higher, because a lack of resolution would likely instigate a public fallout. Peter Lorentzen (2014) notes that media criticism can be effective at supervising local officials only after striking a delicate balance between media control and freedom. These arguments highlight the importance of addressing the limits of media criticism, in addition to understanding the utilities it provides to the authoritarian rule. Why are certain critical reports acceptable but not others? This research gap necessitates unpacking media criticism and studying the differences within. For example, Li Shao's (2018) recent research sheds light on the different types of criticism by finding that media censorship tends to tolerate criticism of government performance, especially in public goods provision, while strictly prohibiting criticism that challenges the political rule. Analyzing not only the content but also the source and impact of media criticism, this book differentiates television critical reports and explicates their utilities and limits by situating them in the process of local governance.

More important, the existing explanations, though helpful for understanding the utilities of media criticism, address this question primarily from the central leadership's perspective, thus being unable to offer a sufficient account of media criticism at the local level. In China's decentralized media control system, traditional media outlets, including

1 newspapers and television stations, are owned and *directly* managed by local
2 governments at matching administrative levels. For example, municipal
3 television stations are directly managed by municipal governments in their
4 day-to-day news production, though higher-level governments and the
5 broader political context certainly also exert influence. Therefore, local
6 governments are empowered to censor critical reports about themselves
7 (Tong 2010), which eludes the existing explanations that focus on the
8 interests of the central leadership and are largely detached from local
9 politics. If media criticism helps the regime supervise local officials, then
10 these local officials ought to have strong incentives to block critical
11 reports by the local media that implicate themselves.

12   An illustrative example of the local power in media control is the
13 central leadership's response to a journalistic practice called cross-regional
14 supervision (异地监督), which was popular in the late 1990s and the
15 early part of the following decade. Journalists developed this practice to
16 dodge local media control by covering wrongdoing by local governments
17 in neighboring localities (Liebman 2011). As this strategy became more
18 popular, local leaders grew wary of cross-regional supervision. They suc-
19 cessfully petitioned the central leadership to ban this practice in 2005
20 and closed this loophole in local media control (Shirk 2011; Tong and
21 Sparks 2009; Y. Zhao 2008). Given this logic, why would local leaders
22 allow media criticism in their own jurisdiction, where they have the
23 power to control critical reporting?

24   Furthermore, the existing explanations have yet to offer a sys-
25 tematic account for the *variations* in topic, frequency, and rectifying
26 consequences of critical reporting, which again requires a decentralized
27 view on government authority. To be sure, recent studies in the area
28 of online censorship have made great strides in identifying the logic
29 behind controlling online critical information (e.g., Gueorguiev and
30 Malesky 2019; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 2014, 2017). For example,
31 some recent studies find that the variation in the rectifying effect of
32 online media exposure of official misconduct can be attributed to the
33 publicity of such exposure and whether the nature of the wrongdoing
34 is a priority concern for the government (Cheong and Gong 2010;
35 Huang, Boranbay-Akan, and Huang 2019; Zhou and Cai 2020). While
36 these findings are illuminating, the variables of publicity and alignment
37 with government priorities remain somewhat inexact. Furthermore, the
38 underlying perspective still treats the government as a unitary entity
39 without adequately considering the diverging interests of local leaders,
40

which may be a natural result of the more centralized Internet censorship authority. To understand local critical reporting in television news, there needs to be a systematic examination of its regional and temporal variations from the local leadership's perspective.

Convenient Criticism

To gain a better understanding of media criticism at the local level, this book first revisits some established assumptions in the conceptual framework of authoritarian media control. Specifically, when media control is eased or lifted, the media can facilitate an open public discourse that would pave the way for political liberalization, playing an important role in regime transition (Diamond and Plattner 2012; Howard 2010; Lawson 2002; Randall 1993; Skidmore 1993); when media control persists or evolves with more sophistication, the media can consolidate authoritarian rule by effectively manipulating public opinion through censorship and propaganda (Brady 2008; Stockmann 2013; Y. Zhao 1998; White, Oates, and McAllister 2005). These assumptions on how media and politics interact, despite their theoretical utilities, do not fully capture the dynamics of limited yet sustainable local critical reporting in China. The derived view on journalists also does not fully describe the mission of Chinese television journalists. This book takes this framework as a starting point, challenging and building on it in three ways.

First, conceptualizing media control primarily as suppression of journalism obscures how the media can be used to advance authoritarian rule in other important ways. The suppression of journalism is undoubtedly important—its theoretical and empirical implications have generated seminal works in this field that articulate the increasingly sophisticated tactics of state control over the media and the consequence of public opinion manipulation and authoritarian consolidation (Hassid 2008; Stern and O'Brien 2012; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Stockmann 2013). However, the logic of media control as suppression, persuasive as it is, suggests that criticism is inconvenient to authoritarian rule, thus unable to fully explain why critical reporting on citizen grievances and other governance problems is allowed and sometimes even encouraged by local leaders. As a recent commentary points out, the centrality of the "repression-resistance" axis has led to "authoritarian determinism," rendering reductionism in the study of political communication in China

1 (Guan 2019). This research gap necessitates careful consideration of
2 the political and governance context in which media criticism emerges.
3   Recent studies have started to move away from this binary per-
4 spective. Maria Repnikova (2017a) insightfully argues that the central
5 state and critical journalists formed a fluid collaborative relationship
6 based on their shared goal to improve governance. To further understand
7 the political significance of the less critical, more pragmatic television
8 journalists at the local level, this book reconceptualizes media control
9 as a broad mechanism of political domination that limits journalism to
10 any form of reporting deemed by the political authority as convenient,
11 which can be either adulatory or critical. In this conceptualization,
12 media control is embodied as not only suppressing media criticism but
13 also expropriating it. As this book demonstrates, in the complex and
14 dynamic realities of politicking, suppression is not the only way that
15 media control is exercised. Strategically encouraging media criticism can
16 increase local leaders' capacity of bureaucratic control and their advantage
17 in career advancement. This is especially true for leaders who are savvy
18 about leveraging informal politics outside of formal institutional powers,
19 such as media criticism, to mitigate the principal-agent problem in the
20 local bureaucracy where street-level implementation is lax or absent.
21 Therefore, critical reporting in this context should be understood as a
22 result of political control, rather than a lack of it.
23   When local leaders allow organic criticism, journalists select news
24 leads about individual grievances or governance problems from citizen
25 hotline calls and social media posts, report on these problems in the
26 frame of bureaucratic ineptitude, and sometimes correct misbehaving
27 street-level bureaucrats. Through this mechanism, local leaders can shift
28 the burden of supervising street-level bureaucrats to local media outlets,
29 rather than overseeing their subordinates in a centralized, active, and
30 direct way. This logic is similar, though on a more limited scale, to
31 Mathew McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz's (1984) "fire-alarm over-
32 sight" model that describes a decentralized way of legislative oversight
33 over the executive branch in democratic politics, where legislatures rely
34 on interest groups, the media, or constituents to "sound an alarm" and
35 report problems in policy design or implementation.
36   When local leaders pursue orchestrated criticism, they direct local
37 media outlets to cover specific governance issues, which are typically
38 priorities on their governance agendas. Journalists producing these reports
39 are empowered, with limited supervisory authority, to help local leaders
40

achieve their governance goals. Orchestrated criticism follows a logic
similar to "going public," a media strategy used by some presidents and
members of Congress in the United States to overcome institutional
weakness in achieving policy agendas (Cook 2005; Kernell 2007; Vin-
son 2017). Chinese local leaders' orchestration of critical reporting also
attempts to achieve political and policy objectives by compensating for
the institutional insufficiency in reducing laxity or noncompliance when
street-level bureaucrats carry out administrative orders or implement
policies. By resorting to critical reporting, local leaders employ the media
power of publicity to stage veiled public humiliation of misbehaving street-
level bureaucrats, who then immediately correct their misbehavior due
to public disgrace and the worry over adverse career impact. However,
unlike their American counterparts who may publicly criticize fellow
politicians, local leaders in China orchestrate critical reporting behind
the scene to disparage their subordinates. In this way, the media are
leveraged to influence not only the public by shaping their opinions,
but also the governing elites by inducing compliant behavior (Kedrowski
1996; Malecha and Reagan 2012; Vinson 2017).

Taken together, in allowing organic or orchestrated criticism,
local leaders' career interests empower local media to participate in the
governance process that is often plagued by laxity, noncompliance, and
maneuver. For local leaders, critical reporting can enhance their bureau-
cratic control over subordinates, which then likely improves governance
outcomes and their career prospects. Furthermore, this strategic use of
media criticism advances the theory of media effects by expanding the
media's role in authoritarian politics from manipulating public opinion
to correcting elite behavior.[9]

Second, this book challenges the implication of a deeply antagonistic
relationship between the authoritarian state and the media, emanating
from conceptualizing media control exclusively as suppression. This view
obfuscates the dimension of collaboration or concord between the state and
the media. Recent works by Maria Repnikova (2017a) and Rongbin Han
(2018), for example, respectively show that the central state and critical
journalists actually share the common goal of governance improvement,
and that the pro-government voices online, which often turn out to be
more potent than the dissenting ones, command the cyberspace. The
demanding, persistent political control over journalists and other media
content providers does not necessarily diminish the mutually beneficial
aspects of the state-media relationship.

It has been well established that the small elite segment of print journalists[10] who courageously resist state control disproportionally encounter political suppression. But typical Chinese journalists, including local television journalists, seek to build lasting bridges between the government and citizens. These journalists, referred to in this book as *pragmatic journalists*, mostly work for local print, broadcast, and radio outlets, and they reliably follow orders from their superiors within both their news organizations and the local governments.[11] Yet, they are not merely a mouthpiece for the regime. The commercial pressure to compete for viewers and the journalistic identity of "helping ordinary folks solve problems"—a commonly used livelihood news slogan with a populist flavor—drive pragmatic journalists to engage in limited critical reporting. Still, they are different from critical print journalists in that their primary goal for critical reporting is not to engender impactful policy change, but to produce immediate, incremental governance improvements that correct misbehaving street-level bureaucrats and redress citizen grievances. This journalistic intention complements local leaders' career interests that are typically pegged to competitive governance records.

In producing organic criticism, journalists continually learn and abide by the changing boundaries of critical reporting at the local level. With local leadership change occurring every few years, journalists steer their critical reporting along the shifting political currents, the signs of which are delivered through both formal ways of administrative orders and directives and informal ways of conversations, negotiations, and trial and error. When local leaders are perceived to appreciate media criticism, journalists employ several tried tactics to push for critical reporting, discussed in detail in chapter 2. For example, journalists can ride the wave of local governance initiatives or campaigns by focusing their critical reporting on relevant governance problems. On these topics, journalists have more space to criticize street-level bureaucrats for lackluster oversight. Journalists can also use the rhetorical frame of "rightful resistance" (O'Brien and Li 2006) by invoking relevant laws, regulations, policies, and speeches to justify their critical reporting. These reports, however, are typically followed up in subsequent news broadcasts highlighting the resultant governance improvement, ending a negative news story with a positive outcome that underscores government responsiveness.

In producing orchestrated criticism, journalists are empowered to supervise specific government bureaus and their bureaucrats responsible for policy implementation. Local leaders determine the topics and bound-
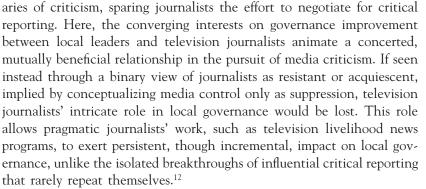
aries of criticism, sparing journalists the effort to negotiate for critical reporting. Here, the converging interests on governance improvement between local leaders and television journalists animate a concerted, mutually beneficial relationship in the pursuit of media criticism. If seen instead through a binary view of journalists as resistant or acquiescent, implied by conceptualizing media control only as suppression, television journalists' intricate role in local governance would be lost. This role allows pragmatic journalists' work, such as television livelihood news programs, to exert persistent, though incremental, impact on local governance, unlike the isolated breakthroughs of influential critical reporting that rarely repeat themselves.[12]

Third, this book dissects the changing boundaries of critical reporting, contributing new findings on the factors that regulate the patterns of critical reporting. It finds that local leaders' career interests and individual characteristics such as age and leadership style are among the powerful explanations. Media factors such as market competition and contextual factors such as national and local political events and local economic development also account for the variations. Given these variables, media criticism is convenient only when motivated political leaders know how to use it, suggesting a complex media strategy consisting of not only bolstering propaganda but also expropriating criticism. When local leaders perceive worthy benefits in recruiting the media as a loyal and eager partner to address governance problems, the resulting critical reporting aligns and advances the interests of three key actors in the local governance process—local leaders, local media, and aggrieved citizens—by criticizing and correcting street-level bureaucrats.

On a deeper level, convenient criticism captures the evolving ways in which the media are perceived and employed by the party-state. As early as 1902, Vladimir Lenin argued in *What Is to Be Done?* that "a newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and collective agitator but also a collective organizer." (Lenin 1963–70, 5:10–11) This media conception was put into practice when he declared in 1917 that "all bourgeois newspapers be shut down" in the former Soviet Union (Fu 1996, 144). Similarly, the Chinese party-state grasped control and monopolized institutions such as education, newspapers, magazines, television and radio broadcasting, and social science research, all of which "were regarded as tools of political indoctrination under the jurisdiction of the party's Department of Propaganda." (Fu 1996, 144) Therefore, journalism in its orthodox sense barely existed at the beginning of the People's Republic.

1 Persuasion, indoctrination, and mobilization were the main purposes of
2 the media. Then, media reforms started in the 1980s as part of the fun-
3 damental policy shift of reform and opening; it consisted of deregulation,
4 commercialization, and partial privatization (Stockmann 2013). As a
5 result, the space for journalism has grown, not least indicated by the peak
6 of investigative journalism in the mid-aughts, as discussed earlier. More
7 significantly, the power of media criticism made savvy politicians realize
8 that the political potential of the media expands beyond public opinion
9 manipulation; it can also enhance bureaucratic control over subordinates.
10 As local leaders discover the effectiveness of media criticism at eliciting
11 swift responses and actions to achieve governance goals, journalists are
12 empowered within a limited scope to criticize and correct low-level
13 government officials. The increasingly prevalent use of media criticism
14 for intraparty purposes shows how far the state-media relationship has
15 evolved since Lenin's conception of the communist media.
16
17
18   ## Media Capture at the Local Level
19
20 The theory of convenient criticism elucidates media supervision of a
21 different kind; instead of the media independently supervising the state,
22 as implied in the notion of the fourth estate and other idealized views
23 on the media as an agent that speaks truth to power, the theory of
24 convenient criticism shows that the state can capture media criticism,
25 through either passively allowing it or proactively pursuing it. The goal
26 is not to limit state power, but to improve governance so that relevant
27 political interests are advanced. This mechanism of media politics sheds
28 light on the innovative force in governance and politicking, released in
29 the complex and elastic party-state system.
30   The theory of convenient criticism also illuminates the locus of
31 media capture and its intricacies. Local leaders' capture of the local media
32 is not absolute, and they have to balance competing priorities. In China,
33 within each municipal and provincial party-state, the propaganda depart-
34 ment directly oversees the work of the local television station. The local
35 propaganda department is under the direction of the local party secretary,
36 who is in charge of all affairs in the local jurisdiction; simultaneously,
37 it is also under the control of the central leadership via the propaganda
38 system (宣传系统) that links the Central Propaganda Department to its
39 local branches. As elaborated in chapter 2, such a line/piece (条/块)—
40

horizontal and vertical—crosshatching administrative structure allows
local discretion while ensuring central control. An important implication
is that local party secretaries may have to compete with directions from
higher-level leadership delivered through the propaganda system while
leveraging media criticism to increase their bureaucratic capacity and
advance their governance agenda, given that the bandwidth of local
media reporting is finite. Of course, local party secretaries are keenly
aware of the importance of following through propaganda tasks from the
higher level, especially during sensitive political times such as leadership
transition, Party Congress meetings, and People's Congress meetings.
Therefore, how to balance the locus of media capture so that it serves
local leaders' career interests while accomplishing propaganda tasks from
the higher-up is a telltale sign of local leaders' ability to maneuver media
capture to their advantage. Furthermore, to achieve the delicate balance
between critical reporting and its potential backlash of political instability
adds another layer of complexity. The strategic use of media criticism is
an outcome of as much political ambition as astuteness.

Indeed, because the state already captures the media through effec-
tive media control, media capture at the local level is more about who
within the party-state dominates that capture.[13] In the Maoist era when
the media were merely a mouthpiece of the party-state, media capture
was more uniform across the country; the content of media reporting
was highly synchronized. In the reform era, policy changes have led to
rapid media commercialization, which, inadvertently, has showcased the
vast possibilities brought about by the media power of publicity. It can
facilitate accomplishment of governance goals, for example. As a result,
the media, as they are perceived and utilized by the party-state, have
diversified from an ideological weapon into a governance instrument. Local
party secretaries who are ambitious and savvy enough to realize how the
media can greatly aid their political careers have greater incentives to
capture the local media. By allowing or even encouraging limited critical
reporting, local party secretaries control the narrative of media criticism
and discipline misbehaving subordinates, the discursive and practical
implications of which reinforce the image of a local government that is,
though imperfect, responsive and capable. As discussed in detail in the
following chapters, some local party secretaries' heavy involvement in the
production of critical television reports clearly indicates a media capture
that is intended not only to influence political discourse and public opin-
ion, but also to improve governance and advance their political careers.

1   This book builds on the existing literature on media criticism. By
2 focusing primarily on the central-level media outlets, existing studies
3 have found that the central party-state allows media criticism to supervise
4 and discipline local governments for compliance, as discussed earlier.
5 The theory of convenient criticism lowers the level of inquiry from
6 the central level to the local level, yet the findings here are more than
7 just applying a similar mechanism of limited media supervision to the
8 local level. Local party secretaries, the main determiner of local critical
9 reporting, are driven by a set of career interests that are different from
10 those of the central leadership. As discussed in chapter 3, even among
11 local party secretaries, those at the provincial level have distinct career
12 interests from those at the municipal level, which in part explains the
13 varying patterns of critical reporting. Furthermore, even within a leader's
14 tenure cycle, the incentive to pursue critical reporting changes; it is
15 stronger at the beginning of the tenure cycle and it fades as one prepares
16 for the next promotion. Although the mechanism of using the media to
17 induce misbehavior correction is similar, the different immediate goals
18 mean that the frequency, intensity, and substantive topics of critical
19 reporting vary across region and time, discussed in detail in chapter 5.
20
21
22   **Contributions to Understanding Authoritarianism**
23
24 By situating local critical reporting in the local governance process, this
25 book reveals the evolving roles that local leaders, local media, and citizens
26 play in their respective pursuits of career advancement, profit and impact,
27 and justice and prosperity. These findings have further implications for
28 the study of authoritarianism.
29
30 Addressing Citizen Grievances
31
32 Addressing citizen grievances is key to maintaining "performance legit-
33 imacy" (Nathan 2009), a crucial factor in prolonging the authoritarian
34 rule. Existing studies on authoritarian politics find that citizen grievances
35 can be addressed by limited political openings, or quasi-democratic
36 institutions, such as the formal institutions of elections, parliaments,
37 and the rule of law (Brownlee 2007; Distelhorst 2017; Gallagher 2017;
38 Gandhi 2008; Lust-Okar 2005; Magaloni 2006; Manion 2015; Truex 2016;
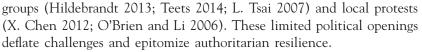39 Yuhua Wang 2014), and the informal measures that allow civil society
40

groups (Hildebrandt 2013; Teets 2014; L. Tsai 2007) and local protests
(X. Chen 2012; O'Brien and Li 2006). These limited political openings
deflate challenges and epitomize authoritarian resilience.

Building on these theoretical insights, the theory of convenient
criticism reveals another mechanism through which citizen grievances,
typically framed in television reports as individual problems rather than
mobilizable issues, can be addressed in an effective and sustainable way.
Journalists help citizens articulate their grievances and strategize about
acceptable but potent narratives of corrective critical reporting. In
orchestrated criticism, citizen grievances in relevant issue areas receive
immediate responses due to local leaders' calculated support. In organic
criticism, street-level bureaucrats also tend to respond quickly due to
fear of public humiliation and adverse career impact.

The channel of corrective critical reporting is similar to the local
governments' own feedback systems aiming at absorbing citizen grievances,
such as the letters and visits bureau (Dimitrov 2013, 2015; Luehrmann
2003) and the online complaint system (Cai and Zhou 2019; Distelhorst
and Hou 2017). However, these governmental feedback systems may be
difficult for average citizens to access, and they often fail to effectively
respond due to insufficient rule of law (Hu, Wu, and Fei 2018) and
distortion of information by the intermediate levels within the local
governments (Lorentzen 2017, 478–79; O'Brien and Li 1999: 179; Pan
and Chen 2018). Many citizens turned to the media precisely because
governmental feedback systems turned out to be futile. Indeed, most
petitions filed online or through the letters and visits bureaus received
no response (Ling 2014; Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016), and many aggrieved
citizens had to use the "troublemaking" tactic to elicit an effective response
(X. Chen 2009, 2012). The limitations of the governmental feedback
systems can, to a certain degree, be mitigated by media criticism, espe-
cially when the issues overlap with local leaders' governance agendas.

Limitations of the State-Society Framework

This book's focus on local media reveals the limitations of the state-soci-
ety framework in studying authoritarian politics in China. The mutually
beneficial relationship between local governments and local media and
between local media and aggrieved citizens position pragmatic journalists
somewhere in between the state and the society. Pragmatic journalists
are different from the traditional civil society, such as nongovernmental

1 organizations (NGOs), religious groups, and civil associations, because
2 they work for media organizations owned and controlled by the state.[14]
3 Meanwhile, after three decades of media reforms that catalyzed the
4 remarkable evolution of journalistic norms and practices, pragmatic jour-
5 nalists' professional identities have aligned with the interests of ordinary
6 citizens, which often contradict local governance outcomes.
7   Because the local media straddle the state and the society, they have
8 established credibility among both. Citizens trust the local media due
9 to their effectiveness at correcting misbehaving street-level bureaucrats
10 and the observable progress on redressing grievances; local leaders trust
11 the local media as an institution firmly under their control. Television
12 journalists are known to obey political boundaries, different from their
13 elite counterparts at print media outlets who have developed a reputation
14 for muckraking. This quality has turned into an advantage for television
15 journalists when they interact with local officials. Consequently, local
16 television news programs are in a unique position to advance the interests
17 of both the state and the society by disciplining street-level bureaucrats
18 and addressing citizen grievances. This is fundamentally different from
19 the role played by other civil society groups such as NGOs and religious
20 groups that the authoritarian regime distrusts and constrains.
21   Other recent studies have also challenged the dualistic framework
22 of state and society. As Yuen Yuen Ang (2018, 45–46) insightfully points
23 out, "the presumed dichotomy between the state and society is a false
24 one," and in China "there has always been an intermediate layer of actors
25 between the state and society," such as the educated, landholding elites
26 in ancient China and the civil service today. Local media also occupy an
27 intermediate position where they have access to those in power through
28 their official status while being rooted in local communities as a result
29 of their commercial orientation and journalistic motivations. In his
30 recent article, Philip C. C. Huang (2019) argues that a more important
31 dimension to understanding China's governance system is the long-term
32 interactions *between* state and society, which has given rise to "the third
33 sphere" where much of governance occurs through administrative con-
34 tracting. This view further explicates the logic of convenient criticism,
35 where critical reporting becomes a governance instrument operated by
36 the media power of publicity, rather than administrative authority or
37 political power, to achieve immediate governance outcomes. In other
38 words, critical reporting is "contracted" to improve governance. The
39 news production process, as shown in this book, consists of frequent
40

interactions among citizens, journalists, and local officials, bridging and
integrating the traditionally conceptualized state and society.

Informal and Innovative Local Politics

Local leaders' innovative and strategic use of media criticism to increase
bureaucratic control and improve governance reflects the importance
of informal politics in mitigating the inadequacy of formal institutional
powers (D. Chen 2016; Heilmann and Perry 2011). Leveraging the media
power of publicity to discourage noncompliant behavior at the lower levels
of bureaucracy is an unscripted strategy that accomplishes local leaders'
political objectives. This innovative energy stems from the complex and
elastic political system that rewards achieving desirable governance goals.
Competence, including that achieved through innovative means, is often
seen as an effective path toward career advancement.

The innovative energy in authoritarian media politics finds reso-
nance in democracies. Bartholomew Sparrow (1999), Michael Schudson
(2002), and Timothy Cook (2006) argue that the news media should
be seen as a political institution exerting influence in the political pro-
cess and affecting policy. More recently, Danielle Vinson (2017) finds
that elected officials in the United States often "go public," also an
unscripted strategy, to achieve their policy objectives when faced with
gridlock or legislative opposition within formal political institutions.
Beyond the United States, the edited volume *How Political Actors Use
the Media* highlights the importance of studying not only how the media
affect public opinion but also how political actors use the media in
innovative ways to advance their goals in Western democracies (Van
Aelst and Walgrave 2017). In a similar vein, local leaders in China use
media criticism when their formal power in the bureaucratic structure is
insufficient to fully discipline subordinates. Importantly, this use of media
criticism is not institutionalized, accentuating the role of informal politics
in understanding the fragmented yet responsive governing apparatus in
China (Junyan Jiang 2018; K. Tsai 2006; L. Tsai 2007).

Indeed, the informality that characterizes Chinese politics has been
studied extensively in the literature. Between the party-state and the
population, Yao Li's (2018) recent study on the rising protests finds that
informal rules structure the state-protester interactions and mitigate con-
flict, demonstrating regime resilience. Within the party-state, the notions
of underinstitutionalization, flexibility, pragmatism, experimentation,

and "guerrilla policy style" (Gallagher 2017; Heilmann and Perry 2011) all indicate "how flexibility and discretionary power are built into the governing institutions of autocracies" (Gallagher 2017, 47). In fact, informal politics in China can be traced back to the revolutionary era and the initial years of the People's Republic. As Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth Perry (2011, 3–4) eloquently put it,

> China's governance techniques are marked by a signature Maoist stamp that conceives of policy-making as a process of ceaseless change, tension management, continual experi-mentation, and ad-hoc adjustment. Such techniques reflect a mindset and method that contrast sharply with the more bureaucratic and legalistic approaches to policy-making that obtain in many other major polities.

The strategy of convenient criticism employed by political leaders at provincial and municipal levels adds additional tactics of informal politics into the repertoire of governing tools. The informality means that media criticism correcting street-level bureaucrats and improving governance is often ad hoc, subject to change based on a number of factors related to individual leaders and the governance context. As the following chapters show, such informality can turn into an advantage for ambitious and astute local leaders, but it can also stifle media criticism when favorable conditions are absent. Such uncertainty grows out of the complex maneuvers in local politics.

Fluid Yet Clear Media Control

Informal politics also accounts for media control at the local level. Although we already know much about the logic and tactics of media control, more needs to be learned about the actual practice of how media control is carried out on a daily basis and at the local level. As Vivienne Shue and Patricia Thornton (2017, 2) observed, scholars "have tended to concentrate too narrowly on governing *institutions* as opposed to governing *practices*" (italics in original). To be sure, existing studies have already highlighted the importance of fluidity, improvisation, and ambiguity in understanding Chinese state control over the media (e.g., Hassid 2008; Repnikova 2017a; Stern and Hassid 2012; Stern and O'Brien 2012), yet these useful characterizations have yet to offer a more exact depiction of the patterns of media control at the local level.

Observing the day-to-day news production process at provincial and municipal television stations, this book traces the mechanism of media control to local discretion, necessitated by the crosshatching bureaucratic structure and fragmented authoritarianism. Local discretion allows local leaders' career incentives, their leadership styles, and the governing context to shape their preferences regarding the boundaries of critical reporting, which shifts as the governance context changes and as the local leadership alters every few years. Meanwhile, pragmatic journalists diligently and continually learn the changing media preferences and adjust their reporting accordingly. Their competent understanding through both informal signals and formal rules from the incumbent local leadership enables them to quickly identify the shifting boundaries of critical reporting and stay in line. As a result, the varying levels of media criticism indicate effectiveness, rather than precariousness, of local media control. It is pragmatic journalists' studious and proficient understanding of the changing boundaries of critical reporting at the local level, rather than the lack of it (Hassid 2008; Stern and Hassid 2012; Stern and O'Brien 2012), that contributes to the effectiveness of media control and, by extension, the longevity of their model of livelihood news. Therefore, situating critical reporting into local governance allows this book to attribute the animating forces behind local media control to local leadership and the governance context.

Redefining Media Politics under Authoritarianism

Pragmatic journalists make up the majority of news workers in China. Unlike critical journalists working for nationally known newspapers and magazines, pragmatic journalists pursue a professional goal of incremental governance improvement and immediate grievance redress, which affords them a strong sense of social reputation and positive impact. In this process, however, while their journalism is invigorated by commercial and professional forces, it is ultimately defined by the party-state. In other words, their journalistic agency has been channeled by astute politicians, kept alive but confined to defined boundaries, to advance relevant political interests. Critical reporting allowed or orchestrated by local leaders and its rectifying effect make television journalists the recognizable hero in improving local governance, shown by the popularity of their programs and the appreciation spontaneously offered by citizens who received their help. The satisfaction of professional aspirations then propels television journalists to identify with this unique style of

1 corrective critical reporting, reinforcing their pursuit of advocacy work
2 for aggrieved citizens that is clearly demarcated and officially endorsed.
3 As a result, selective and limited critical reporting that disciplines street-
4 level bureaucrats and redresses citizen grievances becomes a professional
5 ideal for pragmatic journalists. Because this model of news production
6 has earned great appreciation from the general public, pragmatic jour-
7 nalists internalize it as a gold standard for impactful journalism. In the
8 long term, the inflated sense of journalistic empowerment perpetuated in
9 this model of news production enables the party-state to capture media
10 criticism and reinforce its dominance.
11   This adroit manipulation of journalism is echoed in other authoritar-
12 ian countries. In their recent study on the manipulation of economic news
13 in Russia, Arturas Rozenas and Denis Stukal (2019) find that autocrats
14 manipulate news not just through censorship. On economic affairs, for
15 which citizens have reasonable benchmarks through their incomes, market
16 prices, and other observables, the Russian state television strategically
17 frames economic facts, rather than censoring them, in a way that blames
18 external factors for bad news and attributes good news to domestic poli-
19 ticians. These recent developments in authoritarian media politics reveal
20 that, the crude ways of media control, that is, suppression of journalism
21 through propaganda and censorship, have grown into more sophisticated
22 tactics of media manipulation. Convenient criticism, a form of limited
23 critical reporting utilized by local leaders as a governance instrument
24 in China, contributes to this growing repertoire of media manipulation
25 that aims to mold journalism into an active and sustainable mechanism
26 advancing authoritarian rule. Criticism, conventionally understood as
27 inconvenient to autocrats, is now embraced and expropriated by the
28 more sophisticated authoritarian regimes like China and Russia.
29
30 ## Nonlinear Implications for Authoritarian Durability
31
32 The findings in this book reveal new dynamics in the local state-media
33 relationship in China. They do not yet, however, portend boon or doom
34 in the political future of the party-state. Media criticism is a convenient
35 tool only when used as such. When media criticism is used to rein in
36 street-level bureaucrats and to mitigate the inadequacy in local lead-
37 ers' institutional power, it increases the efficiency and quality of local
38 governance. Additionally, correcting misbehaving government officials
39 on television indicates governmental recognition of legitimate citizen
40

grievances, reinforcing the hegemony of the current political system. As
elaborated in the next chapter, iteration of this process reduces the need
to resort to alternative channels to realize individual interests, fostering
support for the status quo.

While the informality of media criticism can be a source of power,
it can also undermine critical reporting. Local leaders have the power to
encourage critical reporting, and they can also shut it down. Therefore,
convenient criticism can stagnate or even lose its utility when political
leaders limit or reject the media channel as a way of absorbing citizen
feedback and increasing bureaucratic control.

Furthermore, the convenience of media criticism goes only as far as
intended by local leaders; thus, the success and intensity of media-induced
governance improvement vary across region and time. Specifically, critical
reports that can pass the local political scrutiny typically reflect problems
that the local government already has an interest in addressing, not
the ones beyond its governance agenda. Therefore, the lack of in-depth
reporting on real issues means that governance is improved by way of
immediate, short-term results, rather than sustainable, long-term solutions.

Sources and Methods

This book utilizes a mixed-methods approach to illustrate and explain how
local leaders use media criticism to improve governance, how journalists
negotiate with street-level bureaucrats who they intend to criticize, and
how aggrieved citizens find motivated allies in the complex and opaque
governance process. The data were collected from three sources. First,
I conducted ethnographic observation in two separate years—2013 and
2016—for a total of three months at a municipal television station in
Jiangsu. This immersive fieldwork enabled me to trace the process of
news production, which is necessary to parse the forces, incentives, and
negotiations in the dynamic interactions between journalists and local
officials. I use pseudonyms when referring to this program, its producer
and journalists, and the party secretary in charge of the municipality.

Second, I supplemented the ethnographic observation with 47 semi-
structured interviews of over 80 hours with reporters, editors, and producers
at 20 television, print, and online media outlets and with media scholars.
Some of the media scholars have had experiences working as mid-level
television executives and interacting with local government officials in

1 charge of media affairs. These interviews provide the necessary historical
2 and political context and offer behind-the-scenes revelations that help
3 develop and validate the arguments in this book. The interviews and
4 ethnographic observation are complementary, enabling me to triangulate
5 the evidence. The interviews were conducted intermittently from 2012
6 to 2018. I revisited eight interviewees to crosscheck my findings as this
7 research project progressed. In 2013, one interviewee graciously granted
8 me access to journalists working at a municipal television station in Jilin
9 to conduct a survey. Though nonrepresentative of pragmatic journalists
10 in China, this survey provides useful portrayals of journalists and their
11 evolving professional identities. Details about ethnographic observation
12 and interviews are provided in appendix A.
13   Third, I built an original dataset using content analysis and data
14 from governmental documents and media sources. The content analysis
15 coded news reports from five television livelihood news programs at
16 provincial and municipal levels in Jiangsu and Shaanxi from November
17 2016 to December 2017.[15] This original dataset is analyzed to test the
18 expectations developed from the fieldwork and to draw conclusions on
19 the scope, impact, and variations of media criticism. Importantly, three
20 fieldwork sites where interviews and ethnographic observation were
21 conducted are three of the five livelihood news programs included in
22 the dataset, providing additional information to crosscheck and interpret
23 the quantitative data. Where possible, I also draw on other sources,
24 including government documents, existing research, and news reports,
25 to triangulate the findings. Details about data sources and the coding
26 procedures are provided in appendix B.
27   As much as the research design tries to include a diverse and
28 somewhat representative group of television livelihood news programs,
29 practical constraints limit the dataset to five programs in two provinces.
30 Though these programs are not representative of all local television
31 livelihood news programs in China, they nonetheless provide reasonable
32 variations on the key variables. More important, the quantitative findings
33 are situated in and interpreted with qualitative findings from in-depth
34 fieldwork at a variety of media outlets. The theoretical mechanism of
35 convenient criticism is demonstrated by the qualitative cases and vali-
36 dated on a larger scale by the quantitative results. The findings in this
37 book shed further light on authoritarian media politics, and the core
38 argument on convenient criticism may provide a promising direction
39 for future research.
40

Plan of the Book

The five chapters in this book follow an analytical order to present, explain, and illustrate the theory of media criticism. Chapter 1 presents the levels and variations of local critical reporting and outlines the theory by introducing the constitutive pieces of the conveniences afforded by media criticism to various involved actors. Situating media criticism in the local governance process, this chapter argues that critical reporting on bureaucratic ineptitude is convenient, first and foremost, to local leaders by advancing their political careers via increased bureaucratic control and immediate governance improvements; it is also convenient to the local media by advancing their commercial interests and to the journalists by fulfilling their professional aspirations for reputation and impact; finally, it is convenient to citizens by redressing their grievances. Ultimately, the iteration of media criticism correcting misbehaving bureaucrats and redressing citizen grievances reinforces the political hegemony. Besides advancing citizens' material interests, the narrative of media criticism, which blames street-level bureaucrats for governance problems and highlights subsequent governance improvement, strengthens the regime's political dominance by calibrating citizen expectations and maximizing the discursive power of correction.

Chapter 2 delves deeper into the day-to-day business of critical news production, contextualizing and expanding on chapter 1 by exploring how the political, market, and journalistic forces interact and fit together. It starts with a zoomed-out view that overlooks the national media landscape, analyzing how the crosshatching structure of the Chinese bureaucracy shapes media control at the local level. It then addresses how local leaders' political interests and career incentives are translated into the news production process via proficient journalistic learning. Tracing the process of news production at local television stations, two demonstrative in-depth cases are presented to illustrate how advocacy-minded journalists, through learning, adapting, and maneuvering, translate media preferences of local leaders into higher or lower levels of critical reporting.

Chapters 3 and 4 contextualize and elaborate on the bureaucratic, political, and journalistic conveniences, putting together pieces from the recent historical past to shed light on the current institutional structures that incentivize local leaders and local media to pursue critical reporting. Chapter 3 examines the historical legacy, the institutional factors that form local leaders' career interests, and the individual-level characteristic

of leadership style that shapes media control at the local level, outlining the political opportunities as well as constraints for critical reporting. These opportunities and constraints, however, do not fully explain the form and content of criticism, which are shaped by the choices of journalists and the influence of the local governance environment. Chapter 4 outlines the origins of the immense commercial pressure faced by local television stations, before zeroing in on the formation of the unique populist-flavored advocacy journalism that absorbs citizen grievances and reflects governance problems arising from rapid urbanization.

After the theory of convenient criticism is presented and explained, chapter 5 illustrates the validity of this theory through a quantitative analysis substantiated by qualitative cases. It systematically tests the expectations regarding variations in media criticism from the previous chapters using an original dataset. The results show differing explanatory powers of factors in three broad categories—local leaders, local media, and the governance environment. Qualitative cases of two livelihood news programs in Xi'an and Nanjing illustrate the differing processes of how critical reports correct misbehavior and improve governance. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main arguments and theoretical contributions of this book and discusses the limits of convenient criticism and implications for the authoritarian rule.