

Rebuilding a Fragile Institution: The Sisyphean Loop of China's Media Reforms

Abstract: This paper identifies a cyclical pattern that China's media system has repeated during each period of the one-party regime: not only was the national media system built in the early Mao era wrecked and abandoned by Mao during the Cultural Revolution, progress made in media reforms during the Deng and the post-Deng eras was also rolled back along the way. Playing alternately the roles of sponsor and terminator, the one-party system has placed the reform of its media system in a Sisyphean loop of rebuilding and regressing. Taking a historical institutional approach, I argue that this cyclical pattern should not be understood merely as continuous setbacks suffered by media professionals pursuing reforms, but more importantly, as a recurring breakdown of the institutionalization process that the Party has repeatedly initiated and then abandoned amid its legitimacy crisis. In this sense, the history of China's media reforms is a microcosm of the uneasy relationship between the one-party system and its fragile institutions.

During the past seven decades, China's media system has undergone profound changes under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Especially since the 1990s, China's media reform has been closely followed by scholars inside and outside of China. However, there has not been an overarching framework to understand the development of China's media system overall. What is the relationship between the media reform since the 1990s and the media's transformation before the 1990s? What changes and continuities can be found in the development of China's media system since 1949? How has the relationship between the media system and the one-party system evolved over time? These questions cannot be answered without a comprehensive historical survey. Therefore, this paper aims to develop an overarching framework to understand China's media history since 1949.

To track the institutional transformation of China's media system since 1949, this paper adopts a historical institutional approach. More specifically, it follows historical institutionalism in three senses as defined by Pierson and Skocpol (2002). Firstly, historical institutional research is driven by "big questions and real-world puzzles" and usually aims at macroscopic analysis (p. 5). This research focuses on the big question of how China's one-party system relates to and interacts with its media system, and it aims to understand the real-world puzzles present in the

way that relationship has transformed over the past seven decades. Secondly, historical institutional research is conducted through “sophisticated process-tracing” of institutional transformation over time, which “involves a substantial historical component” (p. 6). Despite this heavy focus on history, historical institutional research is different from purely historical research in its ultimate pursuit of an explanatory argument to answer the big questions it raises. Therefore, it is carried out with “theoretical attentiveness to historical processes” (p. 6). In engaging in sophisticated, theoretically-informed process-tracing of the institutional transformation of China’s media system since 1949, this paper ultimately aims at developing an explanatory argument about the dynamics of China’s media reform. Thirdly, historical institutional research rarely treats an institution in isolation but tends to analyze its developments and effects in the broader context of institutional configurations. This paper will seek to understand the development and effects of the institutional transformation of China’s media system in terms of the regime’s overall institutional dynamics during the Mao era, the Deng era, and post-Deng era.

To better understand how the overall institutional dynamics of China have changed over the past seven decades, this paper will also draw on Huntington’s (1970) theory about the evolution of communist regimes. Based on a comparative historical study of major communist regimes at the time, Huntington proposed that all such regimes evolve through three phases over time, each with its own distinct institutional dynamics. He argued that a communist regime was confronted with “a Weberian sequence of opponents” in three consecutive phases (p. 32). First, in the transformation phase, a new regime is usually established by destroying the traditional sources of authority under the guidance of a charismatic leader and a revolutionary ideology. Second, in the consolidation phase, the Party is reestablished as the source of authority and

legitimacy, replacing the charismatic founding leader and the revolutionary ideology. Third, in the adaption phase, the Party must address legal-rational challenges to its authority. Although Huntington's theory was proposed in 1970, it aptly captures the dominant institutional dynamics of China during the Mao era, the Deng era, and post-Deng era. This paper adopts his theory as a starting point to examine the institutional transformation of China's media system in those three phases.

Ultimately, this paper identifies a cyclical pattern that China's media system has repeated during each period of the one-party regime: not only was the national media system built in the early Mao era wrecked and abandoned by Mao during the Cultural Revolution, progress made in media reforms during the Deng and the post-Deng eras was also rolled back along the way. Playing alternately the roles of sponsor and terminator, the one-party system has placed the reform of its media system in a Sisyphean loop of rebuilding and regressing. This cyclical pattern, I argue, should not be understood merely as continuous setbacks suffered by media professionals pursuing reforms, but more importantly, as a recurring breakdown of the institutionalization process that the Party has repeatedly initiated and then abandoned amid its legitimacy crisis. In this sense, the history of China's media reforms is a microcosm of the uneasy relationship between the one-party system and its fragile institutions. In what follows, I present a theoretically-grounded historical overview of the institutional transformation of China's media system in the past seven decades.

Media Under Mao (1949-1976): A Vehicle for Revolution and Continuing Revolution

With the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, a revolutionary one-party system inaugurated an intensive phase of institutionalization in which a whole new set of institutions was founded to transform the old political, economic, and social order. Huntington

(1970) identified this phase as the transformation phase, which is often completed under the guidance of both an ideological commitment to communism and a charismatic leader. This was the case in the PRC. Under Mao's leadership, the PRC achieved a relatively high level of institutionalization in the 1950s along the line of state socialism. However, the reliance on "an ideology and a leader" as the source of legitimacy proved to be both a boon and a bane to the one-party system: while ideological commitment and charismatic leadership can serve as the driving force in the destruction of the old order and the institutionalization of the new regime, they "tend to become dysfunctional to the maintenance of the new system" (p. 26). As the Party establishes routinized and bureaucratic authority through putting a new set of institutions in place, its leader nonetheless perceives this accomplishment in institutionalization as a threat to his personal and charismatic authority, developing an increasing antagonism to the Party. The leader typically seeks to drive a wedge between the masses and the Party by turning to ideological fanaticism. As Huntington noted, "the drive to 'keep the revolution going' was a drive to expand popular mobilization and to reduce party institutionalization, in short, to undermine the stability of the one-party system" (p. 30). Although most charismatic leaders, such as Castro, Ben Gurion, and Nyerere, all went down this road, Mao probably went the furthest by launching the Cultural Revolution, in which his Red Guards were mobilized to destroy the party-state bureaucracy, crippling the PRC's established institutions for almost a decade. The PRC's transformation phase was marked by a major push toward institutionalization followed by a complete reversal away from it, both driven by a charismatic leader and revolutionary ideology.

It was through the conflicting process of institutionalization and deinstitutionalization in

the transformation phase that the historical trajectory of the PRC's media system under Mao was shaped. As a new set of institutions was founded by the PRC since 1949, a new media system, deeply embedded in the new institutional configurations, was also established and put into use. This section will examine the configuration process of the PRC's media system and review how it was invented as a vehicle for a socialist revolution through institutionalization. As Mao called on his followers to destroy the party-state bureaucracy in the name of "continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat," the media system was the first to suffer the brunt of this attack. This section will examine the media system's role in the Cultural Revolution and review how it was transformed by Mao into a vehicle for continuing his revolution through radical deinstitutionalization.

Institutionalization

Just like the PRC's other institutions, its media system was founded in emulation of its counterpart in the Soviet Union. Though the CCP had a small propaganda department before taking power in 1949, the PRC had built up a national bureaucratic system in charge of propaganda by 1951 under the direct guidance of Soviet propaganda experts (Brady, 2009, p. 36). As Schram (1956) observed, the communist media system was "integrated into the total communication system and into the total government" as the one-party system took shape (p. 141). To unpack the institutional configurations in which the PRC's media system was set up, I will draw on Bunce's (1999) comparative analysis of the common building principles of communist institutional systems and analyze how they shaped the PRC's initial institutionalization of its media system. Concurring with Huntington's notion of the transformation phase, Bunce argued that the transformation of society guided by an ideological commitment provided a fundamental point of departure for communist institutional design. She

then laid out three concrete principles of institutionalization that have shaped how communist institutions, including media system, are configured. As the embodiment of these principles, I argue that the PRC's media system was initially configured by the regime as an apparatus of the state, an instrument of the Party, and altogether a vehicle for the revolution.

The media as an apparatus of the state. The founding of the PRC in 1949 not only signified the seizure of state power by the CCP, but it also involved an extensive program of installing a new state apparatus in light of the Marxist theory of the state. Because this theory identifies the capitalist state apparatus as a tool to perpetuate the political conditions for the capitalist relations of production, it dictates that “the proletariat must seize state power in order to destroy the existing bourgeois state apparatus and ... replace it with a quite different, proletarian, state apparatus” (Althusser, 2014, p. 242). The actual process of the replacement was extended and complicated in view of its enormous scale and scope, but its guiding principle was clear and simple. As Bunce (1999) notes in her comparative study, the socialist state was founded on “a conjoined economic and political monopoly that rested in the hands of the Communist Party,” serving as the cornerstone of the institutional design of socialism. More particularly, such a monopoly is achieved through a dual process: on the one hand, pluralism in political and economic life is eliminated by abandoning competition mechanisms, such as the election and market, as well as their underlying institutions, like private ownership; on the other hand, a new state apparatus is installed that imposes “a ‘mono-organization’ order” on the nation, exemplified in the symbiosis of a monolithic party-state and a command economy (p. 21-22). It was through a similar dual process that the PRC's media system took shape.

Through the process of nationalization and centralization, the PRC established a monopoly on the media system by integrating it into the state. By the 1930s, China had

developed a mature press market in which abundant private media competed to meet the diversified needs of readers, keeping pace with the world in terms of their reporting and management (Huang, 2015). After taking power, the PRC started to nationalize private media in the form of public-private joint management in 1950 and completed the process by 1953. Meanwhile, the PRC quickly built up a party-press system mainly consisting of party organs. The Party committees of major administrative levels, e.g., central, provincial, and district, all established their own organs, which were usually named after their respective administrative domains, e.g., the *Beijing Daily*. Such a nationalized media system, as a Chinese editor put it, “depends on state monies to publish the papers, and it depends on state units to subscribe to the papers” (Polumbaum, 1990, p. 40). At the time a newspaper was inaugurated, it would also be assigned an administrative rank according to the administrative rank of its supervising body, which would determine its occupational status and reward. In being absorbed into the administrative rank system, the PRC’s media system derived its initial structure largely from the administrative structure of the state and was “organized like other government bodies, according to rank” (Burgh, 2004, p. 19). Together with the propaganda bureaucracy, the network of the party-press comprised a supra-bureaucracy under the leadership of the Central Propaganda Department. A supra-bureaucracy, which is officially called the *Xitong* (system) in Chinese, has a key feature that “all organizations within the sector must ‘follow the centrally established policies’” (Brady, 2009, p. 12). Media institutions across the nation fall under the propaganda system led by the Central Propaganda Department. The state hence secured a monopoly on the media system, which was an extension of its joint political and economic monopoly.

By means of the socialist transformation, the PRC transformed the new media system from an industry to an apparatus of the state. Althusser (2014) famously compares and contrast

how the state apparatus and ideological institutions in a capitalist state perpetuate the capitalist relations of production: while the state apparatus operates as a strictly organized public institution and functions mainly by repression, ideological institutions operate as relatively autonomous private institutions and function mainly by ideology, which he termed as the ideological state apparatus. The socialist transformation in the PRC not only terminated the media's status as an ideological apparatus of the capitalist state, but it also reformed it as a state apparatus of the socialist state by enduing it with the key attributes of the state apparatus as identified by Althusser. Through its absorption into the propaganda supra-bureaucracy, the media in the PRC was integrated into the state apparatus as "an organized whole whose different parts are centralized beneath a commanding unity." Just as the state apparatus secures its unity "by its unified and centralized organization under the leadership of the representatives of the classes in power" (Althusser, 2014, p. 247), the media in the PRC was directed by the Central Propaganda Department to, according to a CCP handbook on propaganda policies, "sing as one voice" (Brady, 2009, p. 12). Most importantly, as demonstrated by the daily directives it received, the media system in the PRC functioned as much by repression as by ideology, which is the key feature of the state apparatus.

As a state apparatus, the PRC's media system not only fulfills its manifest function as a propaganda tool, but also its latent function as an intelligence network. As Robert Merton notes, institutions have both manifest functions that are intended and recognized, and latent functions that are not intended or recognized. Many major party presses regularly publish internal reports that address the nation's pressing issues, which are called Internal Reference (*Neican*) reports. Depending on their levels of classification, these internal reports are accessible to political cadres of different ranks and serve as important references in their policy-making processes (Wang,

2017). It is difficult to fully understand how the media in the early PRC operated and functioned without recognizing its status as an apparatus of the state.

The media as an instrument of the Party. With its acquisition of a conjoined economic and political monopoly in the PRC, the CCP not only eliminated the barrier between the private and the public, but it also dissolved the boundary between the Party and the state and reversed their power dynamic. Rather than being an organ of the state, the CCP transformed the state into an instrument of its own. As Bunce (1999) notes, because the state in all socialist states depends heavily on the Party in terms of personnel, resources, institutional design and mandate, it is actually “the junior partner in the alliance” (p. 23). The Party achieves its domination over the state by establishing a set of Party institutions which are parallel to respective state institutions in terms of jurisdiction, but which are above the latter in terms of power. Borrowing from the Soviet *Nomenklatura* system, the Party institutions in China are endowed with the power to fill key administrative positions in state institutions with party appointees, institutionalizing the power of party institutions (Brady, 2009, p. 20). With regard to overseeing media-related issues, the designated state institution is the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), and the designated party institution is the Central Propaganda Department. The leadership of the latter over the former is reflected in the fact that the current minister of the SAPPRFT is also the vice minister of the Central Propaganda Department. More generally, the Central Propaganda Department has broad authority over the appointment and removal of all senior personnel in the media sector (Brady, 2009, p. 16). Meanwhile, the Central Propaganda Department also plays a leading role in overseeing all work and policies related to ideology and media. With the instrumentalization of the state, the media as an apparatus of the state ultimately serves as an instrument of the Party.

The PRC's instrumentalization of the media is crystalized into two guiding principles that are still held as cornerstones in official documents and journalism textbooks to this day, namely, the Party principle and the mouthpiece theory. These two interdependent principles, as an ideological construct, are derived from Marxist-Leninist principles. Informed by Marx's materialist understanding that all thoughts are rooted in their class basis, communist leaders since Lenin have maintained that the domain of public opinions must be dominated by the people to protect their interests. To achieve the dictatorship of the proletariat, the media thus should be controlled by the communist party which is "the vanguard of the proletariat representing the interests of the people" (Zhao, 1998, p. 19). In other words, it is only through the leadership of the Party over the media that the people's interests can find their full public expression. This chain of reasoning is formulated by the CCP as the Party principle, which demands that the media accept the Party's leadership, embrace the Party's ideology, and promulgate the Party's agenda. As a guideline for the media, the Party principle legitimizes the party's domination of the media and molds the media into an instrument of the Party. The media's instrumentalization finds its most direct expression in the mouthpiece theory, which blatantly states that "the Party's journalism is the Party's mouthpiece" (p. 19). This theory was enacted as a professional ideal that journalists should internalize and pursue. For example, Guo Chaoren, the former president of the PRC's national news agency, i.e., the Xinhua News Agency, named the anthology of his lifetime thoughts on journalism *On the Mouthpiece Theory*. Through the process of instrumentalization, the CCP exacted unconditional obedience from the media.

It is worth mentioning that the CCP's instrumentalization of the media system was not carried out free from opposition. To push it through, Mao had to launch mass campaigns to crush the resistance from intellectuals. In 1955, a Chinese writer Hu Feng, who disagreed with the

Party's ideological policies, became the target of a national campaign. One charge that captured Mao's particular attention was Hu's complaint in a private letter that the Party's domination of the sphere of ideas had yielded a unitary public opinion. In an anthology of Hu's writings published for criticizing Hu, Mao (1977) penned a commentary entitled *On the Unitary Public Opinion*. Against Hu's accusation, Mao maintained that: "Hu's so called unitary public opinion refers to our denial of the counterrevolutionary's right to express counterrevolutionary opinions. It is indeed true: our institution deprives counterrevolutionaries of speech freedom and endows it only to the people." Based on this categorical distinction, Mao went on to say that although different opinions of people were allowed be expressed in "newspapers, magazines and forums to compete," the counterrevolutionaries had "no latitude in speech and action" (p.158). He concluded that different opinions of the people could be reconciled by democracy, while counterrevolutionary opinions must be cracked down upon by dictatorship. As Qian (2013) points out, a theoretical foundation for the regime to deprive people of freedom of speech in the name of revolution was laid out by Mao in this article.

Mao's theory was soon put into use. After Stalin's death, the Soviet Union started to reflect on problems of the Stalinist system in 1956. The PRC soon joined it and entered a brief period of political liberalization. The state gave intellectuals considerable latitude in all avenues to solicit their opinions. For example, Chu Anping argued in an article published by the *People's Daily* that the Party shouldn't take the state for its own, a poignant critique of the Party's instrumentalization of the state. But such an outpouring of criticism gradually became intolerable to Mao. Intellectuals expressing critical opinions were labeled as counterrevolutionaries and became the target of another national campaign in which more than a million people were persecuted (Yu, 1988). Intimidated by these campaigns, intellectuals under Mao no longer dared

to challenge the Party's policies. In this sense, a unitary public opinion was achieved as much through the instrumentalization of the media as through the discipline of intellectuals in the early PRC.

The media as a vehicle for revolution. With its monopoly on political and economic power and the instrumentalization of the state, the Party in a socialist state manages to penetrate the nation on almost every level. Driven by an urgent desire to quickly reinvent the nation, the Party's unprecedented capacity to "orchestrate developments within their environs" yields, as Bunce (1999) noted in a history of socialist countries, "a tendency toward ... excess" (p. 24). This tendency toward excess reveals itself in the Party's consistent pattern of imposing on the nation excessive projects, which are aimed at extraordinary achievements of all kinds and are pursued at all costs. For example, in 1957, Khrushchev directed that the Soviet Union's economy should catch up with the US's economy in 15 years, and in 1958, Mao directed that the PRC's steel output should surpass the UK's output in 15 years. Because of the catastrophic consequences of such excessive projects, the Party often has to carry out major reforms to reverse them, but the tendency towards excess is easily revived due to the absence of checks and balances, prompting some policies to go around in circles. The tendency toward excess was realized by CCP leaders soon after seizing power and was termed a "rash advance" (*maojin*) in official documents. From the 1950s to the early 1960s, the PRC's general policies repeatedly alternated between rash advances and anti-rash advances, which stood out as a key source of intra-party conflict between Mao and moderate leaders like Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping (Shi, 1990).

Because the excessive projects pursued by Mao relied heavily on mass mobilization, the media system served as a key vehicle for revolution in the Party's drive towards excess. Distinct

from routine administration work, which was carried out by the bureaucracy and with which citizens were only expected to comply, Mao's programs required the people to actively participate in them in the form of mass campaigns. Propelled by a populist approach, these programs put an extreme emphasis on boosting the approval and passion of the people to secure collective efforts. The task of remolding people's thinking was officially termed "thought work" and mainly undertaken by the media system. Maoist campaigns were typically launched by announcing and promoting a goal in the media, which provided a shared springboard for everyone to further convene within their own organizations, reach a consensus about its importance, and finally "contribute to its resolution" (Townsend, 1977, p. 1007). Mao's programs in the 1950s, including land reform, the socialization of industry and agriculture, the Great Leap Forward, and smaller programs like the eradication of insects and disease, were all carried out as mass campaigns. The media system thus provided the key link between Mao and his people that was needed to set his populism into motion.

The function of the media system, as a vehicle for Mao's revolution, was exemplified by the role played by the *People's Daily* in the Great Leap Forward. In 1958, Mao launched another national campaign aimed at exponential growth in the agricultural and industrial sectors. In a conference to prepare for the Great Leap Forward in Chengdu, Mao (1968) stressed that "the organization and guidance of work are mainly done through the newspaper, because not much can be achieved by merely holding conferences." According to Huang et al. (2015), the *People's Daily* spearheaded the Great Leap Forward in three major ways. Firstly, to counter the attack on rash advances from within the Party, the notion of the "leap forward" was first raised and propagated by the *People's Daily* beginning in late 1957 to justify the pursuit of exponential growth and then it was picked up by Mao to clear the way for another rash advance. Secondly, to

mobilize the peasants to join the Great Leap Forward, the *People's Daily* published a large number of reports that were textbook cases of fake news about breaking records in agricultural production, such as yielding 50,000 kg of wheat per acre. These reports triggered a snowball effect in which local communes competed to tell bigger and bigger lies about crop production growth. Because the central government adopted a ration system in which extra grain was extracted from rural areas, the exaggerated growth meant that more extraction was being demanded than local communes could afford to provide, which later caused a famine with a death toll of more than 30 million people. Thirdly, as Mao introduced the Great Leap Forward into the industrial sector, the *People's Daily* also played the lead in the mobilization.

Because the media system served as a key vehicle for Mao's revolutionary programs, keeping it under his control was always one of Mao's top priorities in his political struggles. As Brady (2009) put it, the struggle over the control of the propaganda system "was at the heart of the ongoing struggles" in Mao's China, making the propaganda system "a microcosm of the conflict between Mao and his inner-party opponents" (p. 4). For example, it was only with the full control of the *People's Daily* that Mao could launch the Great Leap Forward in 1958 amid strong opposition against rash advances from within the Party. Mao secured his control of the *People's Daily* by making his secretary Wu Lengxi the editor-in-chief of the newspaper in 1957. As Zhu (2010a) noted, this step also marked the beginning of Mao's efforts to undermine the institution norms of the propaganda system to push his own personal agenda. According to the CCP's chain of command, the editor-in-chief of the *People's Daily* should answer directly to the minister of the Central Propaganda Department, who in turn answers to other top leaders and ultimately Mao. In making his secretary the leader of the *People's Daily*, Mao managed to bypass this chain of command, shifting the central Party organ "from answering to the Party's

central committee to answering to the chairman.” When Liu Shaoqi (1980) reflected on the heavy loss caused by the Great Leap Forward in 1961, he said that “people thought the *People’s Daily* represented the Party’s central committee and promoted what the Party central committee promoted, so for many things in the past few years, half of the blame should be taken by the central leaders, the other half [by] the leader of the *People’s Daily*” (p. 24). In the wake of the Great Leap Forward’s failure, Liu Shaoqi became the PRC’s president in 1959 while Mao started to take a back seat in the daily governance. But as Mao’s tension with Liu’s administration became irreconcilable, he decided to launch the Cultural Revolution, which again began with seizing control of the media and was pushed through by mass mobilization.

Deinstitutionalization

In the Cultural Revolution, Mao’s charismatic leadership and revolutionary ideology were integrated in such a destructive way for the regime that its party-state bureaucracy was identified as the target of revolution. Mao’s last revolution was predicated upon his theory of “continuing revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat”, which was written in to the Party’s constitution during the Cultural Revolution. This theory argued that, although the dictatorship of the proletariat was established in the PRC through the socialist transformation, it faced the danger of being overthrown because people who wanted to pursue the capitalist road had infiltrated the regime’s establishment and risen to power. To maintain their dictatorship, the proletariat must continue the revolution by seizing power from the party-state bureaucracy and removing those “capitalist roaders.” Mao’s theory of continuing revolution cleared the way for a change of course in which deinstitutionalization replaced institutionalization as the basic institutional dynamic of Mao’s China. Within just the first several months of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the “party-state bureaucracy of the central, provincial, municipal, and county

government was all paralyzed or half-paralyzed” by the attack of mass campaigns, and “top leaders at all major levels were mostly arrested” (Xi & Jin, 2006, p. 118). In Mao’s drive to continue his revolution, the media system again served as a pivotal vehicle.

As a major step toward deinstitutionalization, Mao began the Cultural Revolution first by attacking the CCP’s propaganda system and then by ordering it to be disbanded. To test the waters before launching the Cultural Revolution, Mao secretly asked his allies to publish an article in a Shanghai newspaper that accused the deputy mayor of Beijing, Wu Han, of being a capitalist roader. To Mao’s great frustration, the Central Propaganda Department ignored the article for three weeks and didn’t circulate it nationally until he personally asked Zhou Enlai to weigh in on it. Citing institutional rules, the Central Propaganda Department later condemned the Shanghai newspaper for criticizing a high-ranking official without seeking its approval. As Mao’s involvement in the article became known, the Party’s central committee leaders convened and reached a decision to essentially tone down the attack on Wu Han, of which Mao also professedly approved. Following this decision, the Central Propaganda Department blocked several articles blasting Wu Han. In the midst of this storm, although the Central Propaganda Department, as one official recalled, was just “fulfilling its duty according to the Party’s central committee’s established guideline and policies,” the Department’s measures effectually spiked Mao’s guns. Infuriated by the Central Propaganda Department, Mao compared it to “the palace of the king of hell” and threatened to destroy it in March 1966 (Hao, 2010, p. 22). As the Cultural Revolution was formally launched, Lu Dingyi, the minister of the Central Propaganda Department, was among the first five officials to be brought down in May 1966. The Central Propaganda Department was soon attacked by the Red Guards and then disbanded by Mao in

1967. Supplanted by provisional institutions comprised of Mao's allies, the Central Propaganda Department was not restored until after the Cultural Revolution.

Through "launching a coup" in the *People's Daily*, Mao transformed it into a vehicle for the Cultural Revolution, which played a pivotal role in mobilizing the masses to attack the existing party-state bureaucracy. The *People's Daily* was headed by Mao's secretary Wu Lengxi since 1957, but because Mao was secretive about his plan for the Cultural Revolution, Wu failed to keep in step as Mao was testing the waters and lost Mao's trust. At the end of May 1966, Mao founded an ad hoc committee named the Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG) comprised of his allies. Initially headed by Chen Boda, another secretary of Mao's, the CCRG served as "Mao's headquarters for conducting a campaign to attack, downsize, and dismantle the existing party-state" by mobilizing the rebels to seize power in established institutions, giving rise to the power-seizure movement (Walder, 2015, p. 205). The *People's Daily* was the first PRC institution that fell prey to this movement. With instructions from Mao, Chen Boda led a working group to the *People's Daily* and seized power from its leadership team headed by Wu Lengxi on May 31st. In Chen's own words, he "launched a small coup in the *People's Daily*." On the very next day, the *People's Daily* published an editorial that announced the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. From January 1967 to September 1968 alone, the *People's Daily* published 29 editorials to congratulate rebels for seizing power from provincial party-state bureaucracy. With the *People's Daily* continuously beating the drum for the rebellion, the power-seizure movement quickly spread across the nation. As Zhu (2010b) noted, "'the small coup' launched by Chen Boda in the *People's Daily* kindled the inferno of the Cultural Revolution, dealing a shattering blow to the party-state bureaucracy that Liu Shaoqi had been

endeavoring to build for years.” PRC president Liu Shaoqi was also brought down as the head of the capitalist roaders and put to death in 1969.

Amid the power-seizure movement, the PRC’s media system was also destroyed by the rebels and mostly shut down during the Cultural Revolution. As of 1968, the PRC had only 42 newspapers, one running radio station relayed by all the other stations under martial law, and no TV broadcasting except in three big cities (Sun & Liu, 1999). In the ruins of the media system, three media outlets that were controlled by Mao’s allies and often acted in an orchestrated fashion, specifically, the *People’s Daily*, the *People’s Liberation Army Daily*, and the *Red Flag* magazine, continued to serve as a vehicle for the Cultural Revolution until after Mao’s death.

If the early PRC’s forceful socialist transformation of Chinese society vindicated the charismatic leader and revolutionary ideology as the drive of the CCP, then the following series of defeats and havoc culminating in the Cultural Revolution proved how this combination had become a drag on the Party. From 1957 to 1976, Mao “managed to seize one defeat after another from the jaws of an astonishing victory, consigning China to two decades of destruction and pointless conflict” (Walder, 2015, p. 5). As Huntington (1970) noted in his comparative study, once the revolutionary one-party system finished the transformation phase, it needed to move away from the charismatic leader and revolutionary ideology as its source of legitimacy and authority and to embark on a new phase. But just as he noted in 1968, almost all founding leaders of the one-party system remained in office until death, which means the one-party system often has to wait until after the death of the founding leader to enter the next phase (p. 31). That was also the case in the PRC. Although Mao was no longer the president of the PRC after 1959, he remained the Chairman of both the Central Committee and the Central Military Commission of the CCP until his death in 1976, securing his power as the supreme leader of the nation. As Mao

suffered from serious illnesses in the last several years of his life, some senior generals horrified by the Cultural Revolution visited Marshal Ye Jianying, the vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and proposed arresting Mao's allies to end the havoc. Marshal Ye suggested that it was not wise to take actions while Mao was alive (Yang, 2004, p. 41). However, once Mao died on September 9, 1976, Marshal Ye and other allies soon orchestrated the peaceful arrest of the Gang of Four on October 6, 26 days after Mao's death, which essentially terminated the Cultural Revolution. If the Cultural Revolution was, as Huntington (1970) put it, Mao's "attempt to stop the transition from one phase to another" (p. 24), its ending in 1976 finally opened the PRC's gate to the next phase.

Media Under Deng (1976-1992): A Vehicle for Liberalization and Anti-Liberalization

According to Huntington (1970), the revolutionary one-party system usually liquidated the old social order and established a new regime under the leadership of a charismatic leader as well as the guidance of a revolutionary ideology, a phase which he identified as the transformation phase. But upon finishing this phase, the charismatic leader and the revolutionary ideology gradually become more destructive than constructive for the Party. Fearful of being constrained by newly established institutions, the charismatic leader tends to develop an antagonistic relationship with the Party. Accordingly, the revolutionary ideology, instead of legitimizing the regime, is deployed to mobilize the people to attack the Party's leaders or even destroy the regime's institutions. To prevent itself from unraveling, Huntington noted that the revolutionary one-party system must consolidate itself by breaking away from the grip of the charismatic leader and the revolutionary ideology so that the Party itself can regain the authority to rule the nation, a phase he identified as the consolidation phase. As he puts it, "the consolidation of that system requires the establishment of the supremacy of the Party as the

source of legitimacy and the source of power against the leader and the ideology which earlier played indispensable roles in the liquidation of the old order” (p. 27).

The takedown of the Gang of Four brought an end to the Cultural Revolution but not the grip of Maoism on China. At the meeting of the CCP’s 11th central committee in 1977, Hua Guofeng, Mao’s designated successor, delivered a political report about the Cultural Revolution. The report denounced the Gang of Four as an anti-party group that utilized the Cultural Revolution to “usurp the Party to seize power,” but in terms of the Cultural Revolution itself, the report celebrated it as a victory and a validation of Mao’s theory of “continuing revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat.” Taking the removal of the Gang of Four as another victory of Mao’s theory, the report formally announced “the successful closure of the Cultural Revolution.” Based on Mao’s theory about the persistent struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie throughout the socialist period, the report claimed that “political revolutions like the Cultural Revolution will happen many times in the future.” Reaffirming class struggle as the guideline of the nation, Hua (2007) declared in the report that he would “run the country by adhering to the guideline.” Historians have found in recent years that Hua was a much less orthodox leader than his public image suggests. But it was evident that, because his legitimacy was derived from Mao, Hua had no intention of challenging the grip of Mao’s orthodoxies on China (Han, 2011).

After rehabilitating his job in 1977, Deng Xiaoping gradually replaced Hua as China’s supreme leader and steered the nation away from the course set by Mao, making his term in office an incarnation of the consolidation phase in Huntington’s sense. Deng’s commitment to releasing the nation from the grips of the charismatic leader and revolutionary ideology was manifested in the CCP’s *Resolution on certain questions in the history of our Party since the founding of the People’s Republic of China* (2008), which was drafted under his close direction

and passed in 1981. The resolution on the one hand acknowledged the damage caused by the overconcentration of power in Mao and the personality cult of him. It stated that, as the PRC finished the socialist transformation in 1957, “Comrade Mao Zedong’s prestige reached a peak and he began to get arrogant,” making more and more mistakes. Among them, the Cultural Revolution caused “the most severe setbacks and the heaviest losses” in the PRC’s history. The resolution recognized that “the failure to handle the relationship between the Party and its leader correctly” gave rise to Mao’s autocracy and made it “hard for the Party and state to prevent the initiation of the Cultural Revolution or check its development.” To avoid the overconcentration of power, the CCP also took a series of measures to institutionalize the system of the Party and state leadership in the 1980s, including imposing term limits on leading posts. Although Deng served as the supreme leader, he also had to share power with Chen Yun, giving rise to what Yang (2004) terms a twin-peaks structure of power (p. 1).

On the other hand, the resolution also abandoned Mao’s ideologism by unequivocally rejecting his theory of “continuing revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat,” the very theoretical foundation of the Cultural Revolution. Because “the exploiters were eliminated” in the socialist transformation, the resolution argued that “there is no economic or political basis” for continuing a revolution of class struggles. In abandoning class struggles as a guideline, the resolution touched on a common paradox faced by the revolutionary one-party system as noted by Huntington (1970): because it was predicated on a revolutionary ideology of ending the bifurcation of society between the bourgeois and the proletariat, once the bourgeois was eliminated in the transformation phase, the revolution’s success also “undermine[d] the basis of the system” by making its ideology targetless (p. 23). To solve this problem, Huntington noted that a revolutionary one-party system in the consolidation phase tends to “minimize its

ideological rationale ... and instead to stress its justification in the realities of the situation and in the operating effectiveness of its institutions” (p. 28-29). In a similar vein, the CCP’s resolution (2008) in 1981 also concluded that “after socialist transformation was fundamentally completed ... it was imperative that the focus of Party and government work be shifted to socialist modernization centering on economic construction.” Defined by the official discourse as reform and opening, Deng’s programs shifted the PRC away from the course set by Mao’s ideologism and further consolidated the legitimacy of the one-party system.

As China set out to cut itself loose from Mao and his ideology, this major change of course soon set new institutional dynamics in motion, which also led the media system to reconfigure itself in the Deng era. Since the cult of Mao and his ideology was mainly cultivated by the media in the transformation phase, the reverse task of releasing the nation from its grip in the consolidation phase also fell on the media, allowing the media’s transition from a vehicle for revolution to a vehicle for liberalization. But Deng and his colleges had also learned of the danger ahead early on through the Soviet Union’s chaotic transition from the transformation phase to the consolidation phase. When Khrushchev launched an all-out attack on Stalin in 1956, Deng was in Moscow and witnessed how it devastated the Soviet Communist Party’s legitimacy (Vogel, 2013, p. 54). After Mao’s death, Deng took a more measured approach to appraise Mao. In his own words, “when we write about his mistakes, we should not exaggerate, for otherwise we shall be discrediting Comrade Mao Zedong, and this would mean discrediting our Party and state” (p. 220). As his pushed the reform forward, he also kept wary of not letting it undermine the one-party system. Early in 1980, he said that “the keystone of bourgeois liberalization is opposition to Party leadership, but without Party leadership there will be no socialist system” (p. 283). Identifying the challenge to the Party’s leadership as bourgeois liberalization, Deng

continuously emphasized the imperative of anti-liberalization. The institutional dynamics in this phase were further complicated by his struggles with the conservatives who spun his notion of anti-liberalization to thwart his reform and forced Deng to play along. In the long-lasting and multifold tug-of-war between liberalization and anti-liberalization, both sides had to rely on the media, making the media system serve as a vehicle for both liberalization and anti-liberalization.

The media's conflicted roles as a vehicle for both liberalization and anti-liberalization in the consolidation phase marked the emergence of political parallelism in this one-party system. Political parallelism refers to the extent to which political divisions of a society are reflected in its media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 28). Initially introduced to examine the media system's relation with the parties in multi-party societies, the concept also can be applied well to PRC's media system in the Deng era. As Huntington (1970) noted, the consolidation phase essentially meant that "modifications of the system could take place and were taking place as a result of the initiative of key participants within the system," that is, the Party itself (p. 25). With different factions of the CCP embracing and pushing for different visions of post-Mao China, political divisions within the Party therefore also became much more pronounced in the media system.

In the CCP's shift to assert the Party itself as the source of legitimacy against Mao's charismatic appeal, the first crack in the grip of Maoist orthodoxy was opened by the media through a debate about the criterion of truth. As a watershed event in post-Mao China that paved the way for Deng's rise to power, this debate exemplified how political parallelism took shape in the regime's media system. On February 7, 1978, Hua Guofeng's ally declared in an editorial in the *People's Daily*, which was reprinted nationally, that "we will resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman

Mao gave.” Famously known as “two whatevers,” this declaration became an emblem of Mao’s firm grip on China after his death. However, it was soon challenged in mainstream media. From May to June, two editorials implicitly challenging the “two whatevers” were published and reprinted nationally. The key argument, as articulated in the title of the first article, was that “Practice is the sole criterion of truth.” The two editorials implicitly criticized the “ossified dogmatism” and “godlike worship” prevailing in the Mao era and essentially questioned taking Mao’s charismatic appeal as the axiomatic source of legitimacy (Yu, 2008).

Although the Central Propaganda Department was controlled by Hua at the time, the reformist camp managed to get the two editorials published and then reprinted nationally. With support from top leaders of the Central Party School and the army, the two editorials were first published in *Theoretical Trends*, a journal run by the Central Party School, and the *PLA Daily*, the army’s organ, respectively, neither of which had to submit their editorials to the Propaganda Department before publication. The eminence of these two institutions then provided a political shield for the *People’s Daily* and the *Guangming Daily* to reprint the two editorials, which further propelled most local newspapers to reprint them. Prepared under the direction of Hu Yaobang, the vice-chancellor of the Central Party School, those two commentaries got circulated nationally through the careful orchestration between all the institutions mentioned (Wu & Yu, 2009). The national circulation of those two commentaries crystalized the CCP’s political divisions about Mao’s legacy in the media system.

As Deng later revealed, he was not aware of the debate about the criterion of truth when it was launched, but the initiative taken by the media was quickly seized upon by him and stepped up into a campaign to “emancipate the mind” (Xu, 2003). When the “two whatever” was proposed in February 1978, Deng had not resumed his job; he could only object by penning a

letter in April to the Party's central committee that Mao's ideas should be understood "comprehensively and correctly" rather than dogmatically. But after the debate began unfolding in May, he expressed his support in a remark given to the military in June. When he resumed his position in July, he was intensively involved in the debate. On July 21st, he warned the minister of the Central Propaganda Department Zhang Pinghua not to ban the debate anymore. The next day, he met with Hu Yaobang, the vice-chancellor of the Central Party School who played a significant role in launching the debate, and encouraged him to continue his efforts. Although Deng avoided confronting Hua in Beijing, he expressed his support of the "Practice" article during his tour inspecting the northeastern provinces in September. Meanwhile, from July to October, 26 of the 33 provinces and municipalities were reported in the media to be holding seminars on the criterion of truth to express support for the "Practice" article and opposition against the "two whatevers" (Shen, 2018). At the annual meeting of the Party's central committee in December, the debate about the criterion of truth became one of the central issues. With a majority's support of the "Practice" article, Hua's key ally Wang Dongxing who was directly responsible for the "two whatevers" had to review his mistake. Deng (2011) delivered a closing remark for the meeting, the gist of which was well summarized in its title, that is, *Emancipate the mind, seek truth from facts, and unite as one in looking into the future*. He pointed out that the debate about the criterion of truth "is also a debate about whether people's mind[s] should be emancipated." The whole speech revolved around the danger and necessity of emancipating the mind, which was elevated to "a vital political task." He further warned that "a Party or nation will perish" by being dogmatic and the Party must learn to "seek truth from facts" (p. 109).

As exemplified in the “Practice” debate, the media as a vehicle for liberalization both paved the way and provided vital momentum as the CCP departed from Mao’s charismatic appeal to reconstitute its legitimacy with Deng’s pragmatic approach. With the shift of the nation’s focus from class struggles to economic development, many conventions taken for granted in the Mao era became fetters that needed to be broken, putting the media in the front line of liberalization on many levels, ranging from macro policies to personal life. Regarding the liberalization of personal life, the debate about the outlook on life launched by *China’s Youth* was an exemplar. In 1980, the magazine published a reader’s letter expressing disenchantment with the communist educational tenet that one should be totally “selfless and noble.” Asserting that “the propaganda of the past was [an] exaggeration of fiction,” the letter argued that society could only move forward “if everyone strives to improve the value of his own existence” (Ding, 2006, p.105-106). The letter soon captured the attention of the nation and promoted a debate lasting for more than half a year. By challenging the long dominance of universal interests over particular interests, which was essentially rooted in the state’s penetration into society, the letter actually sensed the shifting boundary between the state and society. The letter’s efforts to “legitimate the particular” were consistent with what comparative studies find necessary in any genuine reform of a socialist society, that is, “particular interests can have validity without being expressed in immediately universal terms” (Stark, 1989, p. 22). Deng had deep insight into this necessity. As he put it: “initiative cannot be aroused without economic means. A small number of advanced people might respond to moral appeal, but such an approach can only be used for a short time” (Vogel, 2013, p. 243). The necessity to “legitimate the particular” soon became more urgent. Long cast as exploiters and associated with negative stereotypes, rural entrepreneurs emerged again in the 1980s facing hostilities from local cadres. As economist Victor Nee (1989)

noted, China's media on different levels spent several years propagating the idea that "to be rich is glorious" and presenting upbeat images of entrepreneurs to "create a new climate of legitimacy for the market activities" (p. 183-184).

Deng was decisive about the PRC's liberation from the grip of Mao; he was nevertheless determined to maintain the nation as a one-party system, which was manifested in his consistent commitment to anti-liberalization. Although shifting the source of legitimacy from Maoist orthodoxy to the Party's pragmatism could consolidate the regime's legitimacy in practice, it not only fell short of fully legitimizing the one-party system in theory and it could also make the Party's status vulnerable as people were encouraged to emancipate their minds. To stop critics from overstepping into liberalization, almost each major step forward was followed by an anti-liberalization campaign. As noted by Deng Liqun, a leading conservative ideologue at the time, the direction of China's political wind from 1978 to 1989 was shifting like a pendulum between liberalization and anti-liberalization year by year (Yang, 2004, p. 8). While there was a major push for liberalization every other year since 1978, there was also a reactive drive for anti-liberalization every other year since 1979, all of which were sponsored by Deng. Deng's program of reform inevitably entailed measures of liberalization, but to avoid being seized upon by critics of the system, Deng (2011) denounced the concept altogether because "liberalization is bourgeois [in] itself—there is no such thing as proletariat or socialist liberalization." Deeming liberalization as "antagonism to our current policies and systems and a wish to revise them," Deng identified himself as "the one who talked the most often and most consistently" about anti-liberalization (p. 122). His preoccupation with anti-liberalization also is reflected in his decision to depose Hu Yaobang as the general secretary of the CCP in 1987. Being widely recognized as one of the CCP's most enlightened leaders, Hu was an important ally of Deng. But as Hu's

successor Zhao Ziyang (2009) recalled, Hu's failure to take Deng's preoccupation with anti-liberalization seriously was a key reason that led Deng to lose faith in him (p. 168). After Zhao Ziyang was demoted in 1989 for refusing to crack down on protestors, an official document identified a failure in anti-liberalization as his main mistake.

With the regime's legitimacy on the line, the media was identified as a pivotal vehicle for anti-liberalization while the Party sought to maintain stability in an era of reform. As the political winds shifted and swelled from year to year, major anti-liberalization campaigns were on the media almost every other year beginning in 1979. After Deng encouraged people to emancipate the mind in December 1978, two parallel events soon followed that disrupted the political atmosphere in early 1979. From January to March, questions regarding the nation's basic institutions were voiced both in the posters on the Democracy Wall in downtown Beijing and in a three-month theoretical conference held by the Central Propaganda Department to reflect on propaganda work since 1949, which was perceived by Deng as overstepping from within and without the system. In March, he not only closed down the Democracy Wall, which he openly supported just four months before, but he also delivered a stern speech at the theoretical conference in which he laid out four principles that media in China have had to uphold until the present day: (1) the socialist road; (2) the dictatorship of the proletariat; (3) the leadership of the CCP; and (4) Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought (Vogel, 2013, p. 262-263). In 1981, a national campaign was launched on the nation's media to criticize a hard-hitting film about intellectuals' experiences during the Cultural Revolution as a work of bourgeois liberalization. In 1983, some Marxist scholars' efforts to construe the Party's mistakes during the Cultural Revolution as alienation and to call for humanism were seen as a sign that the nation's mind was polluted by liberalization, which gave rise to another national campaign on

the media to “combat spiritual pollution.” With anti-liberalization as a consistent thread, similar national campaigns were also launched on the media in 1985, 1987, and 1989. Deng was involved in almost every one of them, whether through giving instructions or delivering speeches.

The PRC’s conflicted institutional dynamics in the consolidation phase proved to be a double-edged sword for its media system. While the lasting tug-of-war between liberalization and anti-liberalization carved out space for political pluralism to gain ground in the one-party system, the ultimate head-on collision between the two positions in 1989 dealt a shattering blow to anti-liberalization. As shown in the debate about the criterion of truth, the political divisions within the CCP made it possible for party organs such as the *People’s Daily* and the *Guangming Daily* to reflect competing political orientations, giving rise to pluralism within those official news outlets themselves. This kind of pluralism is usually referred to as internal pluralism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 28). Meanwhile, a few unofficial newspapers aligned with the reformist agenda also emerged and thrived in the 1980s. Among them, the *World Economic Herald*, a financially independent newspaper founded in 1980 in Shanghai, earned the acclaim of the *New York Times* for being “the boldest newspaper in the country” by continuously advocating for economic and political reform “at the edge of what’s permissible” (Kristof, 1989a). Its existence and success marked the growing pluralism in the PRC’s media, which was once dominated as a whole by official media. This kind of pluralism is referred to as external pluralism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 28). It was through the increase in both internal pluralism and external pluralism that media reform in the Deng era was made possible.

But as political divisions within the Party finally spun out of control in 1989, the head-on collision between opposing factions also completely wrecked the political pluralism cultivated in

the past decade. In the face of lasting student protests fueled by frustrations over accumulating social problems, the collision within the Party over how to respond ultimately led to the ouster of the reformist wing from the party's leadership, placing the nation under the total control of the conservative wing. With the balance of power tilting completely toward one side, political pluralism in the media system could hardly survive. After the eruption of the student protest in April, the *World Economic Herald* took a pro-student stance and called for speeding up political reform. Outraged by its bold reporting, Jiang Zemin, who headed the Shanghai Government at the time, soon shut down the newspaper (Kristof, 1989b). With that, the external pluralism in the political system in the Deng era came to an end. Jiang's controversial decision impressed Deng Xiaoping and the conservative leaders in Beijing, paving the way for his unexpected rise to power as the Party's leader in June.

The central party organs in Beijing were not allowed to cover the student protest in April. But after the *World Economic Herald's* shutdown, more than five hundred journalists staged a protest and submitted a petition demanding more freedom in covering the student protest. With the support of the reformist leader Zhao Ziyang, the central Party organs in Beijing managed to cover the student protest with such unprecedented transparency in mid-May that even Hongkong media started to rely on them as reliable sources (Zhao, 2011, p. 311-316). But soon after the army started to open fire on protesters in June, Zhao Ziyang was deposed. The downfall of the reformist wing in the Party's leadership was followed by the ouster of pro-reform professionals from the leading posts of party organs. Lu Chaoqi (2006), the executive editor of the *People's Daily* during this period, wrote in his diary, "We knew we would be ousted and denounced once the conservative took power, because the *People's Daily* had been antagonistic to them for ten years" (p. 163). Instead of waiting to be ousted, the leadership team of the *People's Daily*

collectively sent a letter to the Party's central committee to collectively relinquish power. Lu was later removed from the *People's Daily* in 1990. Sweeping personnel changes such as these brought an end to the internal pluralism developed in the Party organs during the Deng era.

In the political storm of 1989, Deng won the battle with protestors but lost the war over reform. While his hardline stance against protestors prevailed, his reformist allies were purged out of central leadership, which cost him his control over the nation's agenda. Deng managed to advance the market-oriented reform while maintaining the one-party system by juggling liberalization and anti-liberalization prior to 1989, but the collision of the two in 1989 left Deng with no wiggle room and forced him to pick sides. In breaking with and deposing the reformist central leaders who were sympathetic with the students, Deng had to hand over power to opponents of his reform. After 1989, conservative leaders headed by Chen Yun who favored planned economy started to take the helm of the nation. In the absence of political pluralism, the media became merely a vehicle for anti-liberalization. As Polumbaum (1990) noted, "the central leadership evinced a stance toward journalism that could be characterized as counterreform" and implemented it with "political management of the news more evident than it had been for at least ten years" (p. 66-67). As economic policies tilted towards planned economy again, a campaign against the market economy as bourgeois liberalization prevailed in China's media from 1990 to 1991, putting Deng's reform in jeopardy. With no channels with which to speak for himself in Beijing, Deng visited Shanghai in 1991 and maintained that the market economy was only a way of allocating resources and could also be used by socialism. His visit was widely covered, but his view was only disseminated in a Shanghai newspaper that did not even mention his name. His view was soon refuted by major newspapers in Beijing and even Prime Minister Li Peng himself (Vogel, 2013, p 665-669). Amid such a conservative atmosphere, a Mao Zedong fever resurged

among the public. An album featuring songs celebrating Mao even sold seven million copies, which caused some observers to identify 1991 as the year of Mao (Ling, 2003, p. 115).

In a showdown with the conservatives, Deng, at the age of 87, embarked on a one-month tour to southern China in 1992 from January to February, in which he paid intensive visits to multiple cities and repeatedly stressed the urgency of economic reform. Accompanied by major leaders of the army, he cautioned more than once that “those who oppose the reform should be removed from office,” after which Jiang Zemin, the nominal leader of the Party, soon tilted toward reform and circulated a document of Deng’s remarks within the Party in late February (Vogel, 2013, p. 670). But under the control of the conservatives, China’s media were still silent about Deng’s southern talks until late March. With the support of Guangdong propaganda officials, the *Shenzhen Daily*, a municipal party organ, took the risk of breaking the rule that local media cannot report the activities of top leaders ahead of national media and published the first feature report of Deng’s southern talks on March 26th. The report was then reprinted by the *Guangming Daily*, which happened to be read by Deng. While the Central Propaganda Department leaders were criticizing the chief editor of the *Guangming Daily* and trying to block the report in a meeting, they learned that Deng had asked the Xinhua News Agency to reprint this report and caved. The report was then printed nationally on March 31st. On April 1st, Jiang Zemin openly stated that the report about Deng’s southern talks would “help the people around the nation to better understand the spirit of his talks so that it could be comprehensively implemented” (Yang, 2012, p. 56). The report presents a rare case in the PRC’s history in which the nation had to learn about the thinking of its leader from the local media. The fact that Deng had to depend on a municipal party organ to amplify his voice reveals his difficult position in the face of the general loss of political parallelism in the media system after 1989.

After Deng's southern talks in 1992, his reform regained momentum. Socialist market economy soon replaced planned economy as the nation's basic economic institution in the Party's and the nation's Constitution, clinching Deng's victory in the economic reform.

Besides abandoning Mao's ideologism and economic institution, Deng also made a major step towards the institutionalization of leadership, another task identified by Huntington as a key challenge in the consolidation phase. Huntington (1970) noted that the problem of succession poses "the gravest threat to stability in a one-party system." The revolutionary one-party system's major trouble after the transformation phase is that the Party is just "an instrument of the charismatic leader." In order to reestablish the Party itself as the source of legitimacy and authority, the Party has to reverse the relationship between the two and make its top leaders "products of the Party bureaucracy." As he noted in the Soviet Union and Mexico in the 1960s, this trend gave rise to "the institutionalization of leadership in a one-party system" which "requires that it be limited in tenure, limited in power, collectivized, or subjected to some combination of these changes" (p. 30). In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, Deng (2011) recognized the significance of this issue and delivered a major remark on it in 1980 (p. 232-250). The PRC then passed a Constitution that imposed term limits for top leaders in 1982. But amid the turbulent power struggles during the 1980s, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, the two nominal leaders of the Party before Jiang Zemin, were all removed in a non-institutional manner. In 1993, Deng installed Hu Jintao as the successor-apparent of Jiang Zemin, paving the way for the PRC's first peaceful transition of power ten years later.

As Deng and his rival Chen Yun became too sick to take part in politics after 1994, the new central leadership headed by Jiang Zemin started to take the helm of the nation. The one-party system entered a new phase facing different challenges.

Media after Deng (1993-2013): A Vehicle for Oversight and Underpinning

After accumulated successes in the transformation phase and the consolidation phase, the revolutionary one-party system needed to adapt to another new phase to become an established one-party system (Huntington, 1970). The Party could no longer rely on charismatic leadership and revolutionary ideologies to legitimize itself and had to develop alternative sources of legitimacy. As mentioned above, the one-party system usually would “stress its justification in the realities of the situation and in the operating effectiveness of its institutions” (p. 29). With this major shift from ideologism to pragmatism, the Party must “redefine its role within that society” so that it can effectively adapt to the challenges of “modernization and economic development” (p. 41). Huntington identified this phase in which the one-party system readjusted the relationship between the Party and the society as the adaptation phase. As China entered a phase of building a market economy, the CCP also redefined its role in the society in some major ways. Wang Changjiang (2013), a leading theorist of the CCP, defined this change as the Party’s transition from a revolutionary party to a ruling party. During the Jiang Zemin administration (1993-2003) and Hu Jintao administration (2003-2013), the CCP went through significant changes to address a series of challenges that Huntington identified in the adaptation phase.

(1) The rise of technocrats. For Huntington, the emergence of the technocratic class in the adaptation phase was inevitable. Once the one-party system shifted its agenda from the radical transformation of the society to the pragmatic pursuit of modernization and economic development, technical-managerial staff would become the backbone of the system. As he puts it, “once a new technical bureaucracy develops identified with the one-party system, it becomes the source of innovations designed not to destroy the system but to improve it. The innovator are not the reds but the experts” (p. 33). The rise of technocrats in the CCP was directly manifested

in the constitution of its leadership. When Hu Jintao took power in 2003, all nine members of the standing committee of the Political Bureau, the core of the CCP's central leadership, were trained as engineers. Some observers therefore claimed at the time that China was "governed by engineers" (Wang & Xie, 2013, p. 18). This claim might be an exaggeration, but it was no doubt a testament to the growing significance of technocrats in the regime. A survey of the educational background of the mayors of China's 100 most developed cities in 1997, 2003 and 2007 also shows that around 80% of them were trained as a technical, economic or managerial expert (Qi & Lu, 2018).

(2) The recognition of interest groups. With the decline of ideology and the reemergence of pluralism in the economy and society, Huntington noted that various influential socioeconomic groups would emerge in the adaptation phase and evolve into interest groups which were increasingly concerned about their relationships to the political system. As a response, the one-party system would often alter official dogma to "recognize the legitimacy of specialized interest groups articulating their needs" (p. 34). But distinct from the liberal democracy which allows interest groups to compete, the Party would still identify itself as "the arbiter among these interests," a governing model referred to as corporate centralism (p. 38). During Jiang's period, the CCP amended both the Party's and Country's Constitution to reidentify itself as not only "the vanguard of the Chinese working class" but also the vanguard of "the Chinese people and Chinese nation," claiming to represent "the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people." It was this amendment allowed the CCP to offer membership to the burgeoning class of capitalists, which used to be the default enemy of the communist party. In Huntington's words, the CCP's modification of its official dogma allowed it

to coopt different interest groups and serve as “the exclusive guardian of the interests of the society as a whole” (p. 34).

(3) The expansion of popular participation. In the transformation phase, political participation in the revolutionary one-party system was mainly driven by the Party in the name of class struggles. As the Party gave up class struggles, Huntington noted that “the absence of major conflicts of interests within the society” made it possible for political participation to “assume a more spontaneous form” (p. 39). The Party would still monopolize the legitimation of the system, but political participation would stop being merely channeled topdown merely as a one-way traffic. Since the end of the 1990s, all village officials in China have been elected by the villagers. Large-scale empirical researches have repeatedly found that China’s rural democracy has improved village governance and promote the villager’s benefits (Xu, 2009). In the city, a large number of public hearings on public policies are also held each year. The People’s Congress at different levels also became more independent than before. He and Warren (2011) noted that “deliberation as an ethos is now widely pursued within representative and government bodies” (p. 279). Through an increasing number of deliberative venues, the public can now deliberate on policy issues with officials in a more substantial way.

(4) The depoliticization of the society. Huntington noted that the revolutionary one-party system used to “assign political meanings to almost all types of social behavior and attempt to subject this behavior to political control” in the transformation phase, but upon entering the adaptation phase, it decided on “restricting the scope of politics” because “economic, technical, social units require greater degrees of autonomy in order to accomplish effectively the ends of the system.” No longer seeing everything through the lens of ideology, most of the issues are processed from a “functional” point of view (p. 41). Huntington therefore identified

depoliticization as the most significant feature of the adaptation phase. Chinese scholar Wang Hui (2010), informed not by Huntington but by Italian sociologist Alessandro Russo, made an influential argument that the CPC since the 1990s become “a depoliticized apparatus” practicing “depoliticized politics” (p. 9). A defining feature of this period was that political divisions were largely resolved into and treated as technical disputes. The regime became so depoliticized that Wang as the chief editor of *Dushu*, the leading book review magazine in China, complained that it became very hard to even discuss issues about labor and class, central subjects of concern of the regime’s orthodox ideology. As an echo from the citizens, when anthropologist Rofel (2007) did her field research in China during the late 1990s and early 2000s, almost every interviewee of hers began the conversation by declaring that “I’m completely uninterested in politics” (p. 124). Rather than being indifferent about politics, noted Rofel, this statement indicated that it had become a trend for common people to not think public affairs in terms of the party’s orthodox ideology.

It was by adjusting the Party’s relationship with the society in the above four aspects that that the CCP led the one-party system into what Huntington meant by the adaptation phase since 1993. Given the Party’s growing reliance on its efficiency and legality as the source of legitimacy, Huntington identified the development of legal-rational authority as the key challenge for the one-party system in the adaptation phase. While the PRC is by no means a full-fledged legal-rational authority, the legal-rational thread does have gained significantly more weight in the regime’s legitimacy since 1993. Researchers also pointed out some general reasons for the regime to solidify its legitimacy along a legal-rational line. To begin with, unlike Mao and Deng who were the PRC’s founding leaders, Jiang served as a manager in a factory in Shanghai when the regime was founded in 1949. Weatherley (2007) pointed out that such a

career trajectory determined that Jiang lacked the “reservoir of charismatic legitimacy” as well as “personal authority over the PLA,” and therefore “had little alternative but to utilize legal rational methods to build himself up” (p. 138). For example, to remove his political opponent Qiao Shi from the Central Committee, Jiang made it a provision in 1997 that leaders older than 70 should retire. Like Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao was also, as Huntington put it, “a party careerist, having worked his way up through the ranks of the party organization” (p. 30). Besides the leaders’ political calculations, developing a market-oriented economy has also generated a structural demand for a legal-rational institutional environment. In their field work in China the 1980s, economist Whyte (1989) already noted a push for it. For actors in a market economy to “coordinate economic activity within a mutually understood framework of action”, the state had to switch from a commander issuing directives on economic activities to a regulator “specifying and enforcing rules and procedures within which economic actors operate” (p. 240). After China restarted its economic reform in 1993, Naughton (2007) noted that it quickly evolved into a regulatory state and confirmed Whyte’s prediction (p. 104).

Because the Party has to engage with the society through its institutions, it also has to redefine its roles in the society by revamping its institutions so that they could adapt to the new challenges and solidify the regime’s legitimacy. The Party’s change of roles along the legal-rational line therefore also set new institutional dynamics in motion during the adaptation phase, which would also reconfigure its media system. The new institutional dynamics are probably best synthesized by Nathan’s (2003) theory of authoritarian resilience, which has become one of the most influential approaches to study contemporary China in the past two decades. Interestingly, although Nathan’s theory was not informed by Huntington’s (1970) theory of the evolution of the one-party system, it was nevertheless inspired by Huntington’s (1968) theory of

institutionalization. Nathan (2003) noted that as the CCP adopted a pragmatic approach to governance, it allowed its institutions to become more bound by formal and informal rules instead of outright party intervention, giving rise to “increased institutional complexity, autonomy and coherence-attributes that according to Huntington’s theory should equip the regime to adapt more successfully to the challenge it faces” (p. 13). In highlighting institutionalization as the major institutional dynamics underlying China’s economic development and political stability, Nathan identified four distinct aspects where progress were made as of 2003: “(1) the increasingly norm-bound nature of its succession politics; (2) the increase in meritocratic as opposed to factional considerations in the promotion of political elites; (3) the differentiation and functional specialization of institutions within the regime; (4) the establishment of institutions for political participation and appeal” (p. 6-7). Since he discusses the media in the last two aspects, this section will use them as a starting point to explore the unfolding of institutionalization in the media system.

Nathan (2003) noted that China’s media became more independent than before since the 1990s and identified its increasing discretion as an instantiation of regime’s institutionalization process. His account of the CCP’s institutionalization of media was two-fold. On the one hand, he saw the media’s increasing discretion as a parallel to the growing autonomy granted to other institutions within the regime by the CCP. Huntington (1970) noted that “economic, technical, social units require greater degrees of autonomy in order to accomplish effectively the ends of the system” in the adaptation phase (p. 41). Accordingly, Nathan (2003) noted that the PRC major institutions at different levels obtained more authority within their own spheres of responsibilities and received less direct interference from the Party since 1993. For example, the economic policy was in mainly in the jurisdiction of the State Council headed by the prime

minister rather than the Party Central Committee during the Jiang Zemin administration (1993-2003) and Hu Jintao administration (2003-2013). “What belongs to a given agency to handle is usually handled by that agency not only without interference, but with a growing sense that interference would be illegitimate” (p. 11). Nathan named this process as institutional differentiation and identified the increasingly independent media as an instantiation of it. The growing influence of journalistic professionalism in China since the 1990s provided a strong testament to Nathan’s observation (Pan& Lu, 2003). On the other hand, Nathan also noted that the CCP also developed a set of institutions for people to “apprise the state of their concerns,” such as the village-level election and letter-and-visit department, which he termed as input institutions. He also identified the media as an important input institution which “enable citizens to pursue grievances without creating the potential to threaten the regime as a whole” by exposing corruption and abuse of power by local officials (p. 14-15). The rise of critical reporting in China since the 1990s also corroborated Nathan’s observation.

Nathan’s (2003) account provides a starting point apposite to the analysis of the institutional dynamics that reconfigured the PRC’s media system during the adaptation phase, but it needs to be critically evaluated to flesh out its analytical potential. In light of the media’s status as an apparatus of the state and an instrument of the Party since 1949, Nathan’s notion of institutional differentiation put the media reform since the 1990s into the big picture of the regime’s reconfiguration of its institutions. But his account of how the institutional differentiation took place in the media system seems to lose the nuances posed in his analysis. He explained the media’s growing discretion mainly in terms of commercialization. “The media have become more commercialized and therefore less politicized.” In forcing the media to “fight for market share,” commercialization drove the media to “push the envelope of what the regime

considers off-limits” and caused its differentiation within the regime (p. 12). By making the media institution a competitor in the market, commercialization no doubt transformed the media’s status, which used to be just a state apparatus, and provided an important push for its differentiation within the regime. But given that the media is always taken as an instrument of the Party, commercialization doesn’t address why the Party was willing to acknowledge the media’s expanding leeway. Using the example of the media reform in China Central Television (CCTV), China’s national TV station, I argue that the institutional differentiation of media system could take place since the 1990s because the CCP found it instrumental to the institutionalization of the regime which, as Huntington (1970) and Nathan (2003) argued, would allowed it to effectively adapt to the challenges it faced. Rather than merely driven by commercialization, the institutional differentiation of the media system was closely tied in with the institutionalization of the one-party system since the 1990s.

To begin with, a key precondition for the institutionalization of the one-party system was the process of depoliticization, which provide pivotal leeway for the media to take initiative in an authoritarian context. As Huntington (1970) noted, the one-party system used to “assign political meanings to almost all types of social behavior and attempt to subject this behavior to political control” (p. 41). For the media, it meant that critical reporting could be easily interpreted as an effort to tarnish the image of the system and accused of being anti-socialism. Although the PRC somehow started the process of downplaying ideology under Deng’s rule, but the frequent anti-liberalization campaigns often targeting the media still reflected the regime’s extravagant extent of politicization. After Deng’s southern talks, liberalization or more broadly anti-socialism, though still a forbidden zone, is no longer the sword of Damocles hung up above everybody’s head. As Wang (2011) noted, the CCP’s control of media and other spheres since 1992 “is not

primarily ideological, but rather is based on the need to preserve stability” (p. 14). It was this sea change in restricting the scope of politics that not only largely emancipated the society from the domination of politics, but also allowed the institutions within the regime, including the media, to become more independent, which paved the way for what Nathan called the institutional differentiation within the regime.

Bearing the significance of depoliticization in mind, an inquiry into how institutional differentiation took shape in media branch of the one-party system must account for how depoliticization was enacted in a domain once subject to intense ideological orthodoxy. A close look at how it happened in CCTV reveals that the received wisdom on the subject, exemplified in Nathan’s (2003) statement that “the media have become more commercialized and therefore less politicized” (p. 12), seemed to have confuse the cause with the effect. Since the 1990s, Chinese TV stations have made remarkable progress in reshaping the institutional structure to produce more independent news report. In the Chinese context, this process of institutional differentiation was pursued in the name of TV News Reform. As a consensus, TV News Reform was initiated in CCTV, signified by the launch of *Oriental Horizon* in 1993. With its objective approach to reporting, engaging style of delivery and in-depth coverage of society, this daily news magazine program aired in the morning was an instant success that “cultivated the habit of watching TV in the morning among Chinese audience” (Sun, 2003, p. 15). As *Oriental Horizon* redefined the audience’s expectation of TV News with journalistic professionalism learned from their western colleague, it also reset the domain’s de facto standard regarding how news was produced. A new system of production firstly adopted in the program, such as central producer system, contract employment with performance-based salary and full financial responsibility backed by advertisement revenues were gradually institutionalized among the nation’s TV

stations, transforming them from state-subsidized units to market-driven organizations (Sun, 2003, p.3). All things considered, *Oriental Horizon* was an instantiation of institutional differentiation as defined by Nathan in the full sense.

But looking like a story about depoliticization driven by commercialization, the launch of *Oriental Horizon* was actually not initiated by the pursuit of profits, but by the directives from the Central Propaganda Department. Soon after Deng Xiaoping's southern talk in 1992, Ding Guangen became the minister of the Central Propaganda Department and asked that news reports should "cover social concerns." But Yang Weiguang, the president of CCTV at the time, was initially hesitant to undertake the task. "During the Cultural Revolution, the news media could only report upbeat news and no critical reporting were allowed. Now you suddenly ask me to cover social concerns and expose social problems – that'll be too bold to do." He demanded that this directive be formulated and issued as an official document, because "otherwise us news media will be spanked again in case something goes wrong" (Yang Weiguang and the golden era of CCTV). The Central Propaganda Department did so in early 1993. As a response to this directive, *Oriental Horizon* was launched in May 1993. In sum, CCTV was pushed to depoliticize news reporting under the pressure from and with the permission of the Party. Even so, Yang was still very cautious, and aired the program only in the morning, "garbage" time with little audience at the time, so that the risk could be minimized. Measures of commercialization were also a last resort – the producer applied for an annual funding around 10 million Yuan, but as China sharply cut subsidies to media due to declining tax revenues in the early 1990s, CCTV could provide no funding so the program had to depend on advertising revenues.

To be sure, the program's producer also acknowledged that commercialization did provide incentive for the program to "produce attractive content" (Sun, 2003, p.36), but Yang's

ambivalence and negotiation underscored that if most public issues remained highly politicized by the Party, the media could hardly gain ground in approaching them professionally, which would impede its prospect of commercialization. As the program's producer put it, "successful TV News Reform and launch of new programs have always been a result of top-down decision making" (Sun, 2003, p. 4). The institutional differentiation in the PRC's media branch proved to break ground through top-down depoliticization before it was consolidated by way of commercialization.

As the sponsor of the media's depoliticization and institutional differentiation, the CPC obviously took this process as a boost rather than a blow to its legitimacy, the rationale behind which is intriguing and therefore demands exploration. But because the CCP leaders are generally famous for being enigmatic, few direct sources were provided to get to the bottom of their thinking on this matter. It was until 2011 that Zhu Rongji, China's former vice prime minister (1993-1998) and prime minister (1998-2003), provided for the first time a rare window into official thinking on media in *Zhu Rongji on the Record*. It is a three-volume collection of his internal remarks to officials, which was translated into English in 2015. Zhu steered China's economic reform for a decade with a forceful commitment to marketization, establishing himself as "one of the architects of post-Deng China" (Naughton, 2002, p.1). Probably because Zhu mainly forged his legacy in the economic reform, his newly available remarks has not drawn much scrutiny from media scholars by far. However, as one of the most vocal advocates for critical reporting among his peers, Zhu has left an indelible imprint on the media reform, mainly by offering unceasing endorsements for *Topics in Focus*, a CCTV news program renowned for its critical reporting. In *Zhu Rongji on the Record*, the program's name was mentioned in sixteen remarks for more than sixty times, while People's Daily and Xinhua News agency were just

mentioned in one and the same remark regarding the importance of critical reporting. These sixteen remarks constituted a distinctive series of record in which a top Chinese leader unceasingly instructed his officials behind closed doors to put a premium on critical reporting. A close reading of them will help crystalize how Zhu envisioned the media's institutional differentiation in view of the challenges of the adaptation phase.

Known as a straight shooter, Zhu made it explicit in these remarks that his push for critical reporting was driven by a strong urge to strengthen the central government's oversight of sub-national governments as he struggled to undertake a sweeping market-oriented reform on a national scale. His endorsement of critical reporting was therefore aimed at enabling the media to serve as a vehicle for oversight, first and foremost, for the central government. Being the power center of the authoritarian regime, the PRC's central government is at the helm of all policy issues, but for historical and practical reasons, it largely entrusts regional matters to sub-national governments and prompts the latter to follow its policies mainly through controlling personnel matters rather than intervening in particular issues. Defined as regionally decentralized authoritarianism, this governing structure was usually seen as the secret of China's success (Xu, 2011), but Zhu was often assailed by it while seeking to push through sweeping reforms. In Zhu's (2015) first speech to the whole state council as prime minister, he deplored the fact that "if you issued a document, it would be considered a success if 20% of its content were implemented." To strengthen the oversight of policy implementation, Zhu asked his officials on the one hand to go down to check, on the other hand to grasp realities by voraciously consuming news media, as he did. "If you don't read reports, don't watch TV, don't read the papers, don't watch *Topics in Focus*, if you don't know about people's woes and try to understand them, how can you do your work?" (p. 6).

In a gesture of public endorsement, he made an inspection tour of *Topics in Focus* seven months later after taking office. He (2015) thanked the producers for gathering much-needed information on the ground, which was hard for the central government to obtain because even their inspection tours were often staged beforehand (p. 87). Meanwhile, Zhu also expressed his appreciation of the program for exercising the leverage of public opinions to help solve problems. He said that “*Topics in Focus* has fully exercised oversight through public opinion”. As an example, he revealed that after the broadcast of one episode about corruption in the grain procurement system in Hubei, “the provincial Party secretary and governor of Hubei Province could not sit still.” They immediately held a meeting overnight and sent Zhu a telegram the next day promising to implement related reform. Amazed by the episode’s impact, Zhu commented that “it had a greater impact than anything I said, and it made a major contribution to reform of the grain purchase-and-sale system” (p. 85). He further appraised that in “pointing out the various problems of executing policies and prodding all levels of governments to implement policies,” the program “play(s) the part of the shock troops of reform” and “a good helper to the Party and government” (p. 87-88). Therefore, it was to crank a powerful vehicle for oversight that the PRC laid the political ground for the institutional differentiation of its media in the adaptation phase.

While existing literature mainly associated critical reporting with exposing low-level corruption, Zhu’s remarks revealed that the media as a vehicle for oversight assumed a much broader role in cultivating a legal-rational institutional environment than previously recognized. Nathan’s notion of the media as an input institution neatly captured the media’s role in exposing low-level corruption and thereby boosting the regime’s legitimacy. Zhu often expressed his hatred for corruption in strong terms, and critical reporting about corruption indeed drew his

attention – four of the twelve episodes of *Topics in focus* mentioned in the remarks were about corruption. But as Zhu noted, *Topics in Focus* “covers a broad range of topics and almost every aspect of the State Council policies” (p. 85). As he tried to build up a market economy, a pressing issue was whether the government could take on the role demanded by it, on which all the other eight episodes focused. As Whyte (1989) noted, for China to develop a market economy, it must develop a legal-rational institutional environment so that actors within it can coordinate their actions with each other. A thread running through Zhu’s work in the State Council was exactly to impose a “regulatory approach to economic reform” in which new rules were introduced and “at least in principle equally applied to all economic actors” (Naughton, 2007, p.102-103).

For the CCP, building a legal-rational institutional environment entailed that the government must, in Zhu’s (2015) terms, transform its “style and mode of working” because “at the moment the government isn’t regulating the market - it is operating them” (p. 29). On the one hand, many officials were still tempted to issue specific commands to economic actors regarding production and operations. Zhu’s remarks mentioned two related episodes of *Topics in Focus*: one was about how a municipal government forbade the trademark transfer between two enterprises, and the other about how some town governments forced farmers to grow tobacco. On the other hand, many government agencies often failed to take active measures to regulate the market, leaving problems such as fraud, counterfeit products and pollution unchecked. In bringing up six related episodes of *Topics in Focus*, Zhu repeatedly expressed frustration with regulatory agencies for failing to safeguard market environment. “Once *Topics in Focus* brought these issues to light, regulatory agencies immediately took actions, but why waited until then to discover problems right under your nose” (p. 149)? Rather than merely a tool to combat low

level corruption, Zhu's remarks showcased that the media as a vehicle for oversight was a versatile institution in the face of mounting legal-rational challenges.

As Zhu advocated for critical reporting, he was also well aware of its tension with the Party line and repeatedly sought to dispel doubts by stressing that deploying the media as a vehicle for oversight would actually underpin the system rather than undermine it. Similar to the process of strengthening the foundation of a building, defined as underpinning in construction, his remarks expanded on a vision in which the media can be a vehicle for both oversight and underpinning for an authoritarian regime. While Zhu (2015) upheld the Party line that reporting should be primarily positive in principle, he consistently proposed a more flexible interpretation of it in his two talks with journalist. "This policy is correct, it also constrains us ... Does it mean 99% of reports should be positive? ... I wonder if 51% would also be acceptable" (p. 83). With a down-to-earth reasoning, he maintained that the people "will have confidence only after they see that problems are being solved" and "that's why we stress that... oversight through public opinion is also need" (p. 319). Since the 1990s, political scientists have repeatedly found in public opinion surveys that the PRC had the highest level of popular support among the world due to its active responses to people's practical needs (Tang, 2018). Zhu's leadership style and rationale were a good example of this governing approach. Using the success of *Topics in Focus* as an example, Zhu stressed that critical reporting actually make people "hopeful about the future" by exposing and helping solve social problems. To further articulate how the program underpinned the system, Zhu spelled out the program's role in four phrases and inscribed them for the program, that is, the overseer [of government] through public opinion, the voice of the people, the mirror of the government, and the shock troops of reform.

In Zhu's talks with the National Bureau of Statics and the National Audit Office, he also used the problems exposed by *Topics in Focus* to stress the importance of truth for the government's work and exhorted them to also carry out oversight work relentlessly in their own fields. Zhu famously made it a rule for himself to not inscribe words during inspection tours, but made rare exceptions for *Topics in Focus*, the National Bureau of Statics, and National Audit Office, highlighting a consistent strategy of deploying oversight force to underpin the system.

It is worth noting that Zhu's vision of the media as a vehicle for oversight and underpinning was not rare but common among top Chinese leaders. Zhu's predecessor Li Peng is usually seen as more conservative for his hardline stance in 1989, but he also made an inspection tour to *Topics in Focus* in 1997. The president of the Supreme People's Court Xiao Yang ordered in 2000 that the legal system must accommodate media's requests for interview whenever possible and protect the media's right of oversight in settling related lawsuits (Tian & Hu, 2006). Wang Qishan, the PRC's current vice president, is also reported to be a supporter of the magazine *Caijing* which has been publishing explosive reports about fraud and corruptions in the economic domain for two decades, which have prompted many regulatory changes (Zhang, 2010). Zhu's (2015) outspoken remarks put the rationale in plain sight: "It's very important that we strengthen oversight through the media. Our current administrative and legal capabilities alone are inadequate for resolving many serious immediate problems" (p. 317).

Meanwhile, Zhu's vision of the media as a vehicle for oversight and underpinning also found echo in the metaphors used by leading professionals to define their job. When Zhu's successor Premier Wen Jiabao made an inspection tour of CCTV in 2003, its leading commentator Bai Yansong stated his understanding of journalism by quoting from Joseph Pulitzer: "A journalist is the lookout on the bridge of the ship of state ... He peers through fog

and storm to give warning of dangers ahead” (Liu, 2009, p. 482) . In a similar vein, Hu Shuli, the muckraking founder of the magazine *Caijing*, compared her magazine as a woodpecker, “forever hammering at a tree, trying not to knock it down but to make it grow straighter” (Osnos, 2009, p. 60-61). They both downplayed the tension between media and state by stressing how media oversight can be instrumental to the state as a whole. Rather than merely a negotiation strategy, this stance was also found to be held by most professionals in the field. Repnikova (2017) finds in her empirical study that the majority of Chinese critical journalists were mainly aimed at improving particular problems or policies rather than questioning the whole system. As an ideal, the media as a vehicle for oversight and underpinning provided a common ground between the state and the media for institutional differentiation to unfold in the media system.

But unlike the ideal of checks and balances which is at least well-defined in principle, the notion of media as a vehicle for oversight and underpinning can only be played out as a moving target in particular instances, which constantly put all the parties involved to the test. As situations varied and priorities shifted, the state would have to reevaluate and readjust the specific leeway given to the media along the way, creating fluctuating cycles of up and down in its endorsement of critical reporting. Take *Topics in Focus* as an example. Host Jing Yidan disclosed that while 47% of its reporting in 1998 were critical reporting, the number dropped to 17% in 2002 (Shu, 2003). On the national level, Chinese Scholar Zhan (2009) also discerned this cyclic feature during Hu Jintao’s term in office. For example, from 2003 to 2004, as the minister of the Propaganda Department Li Changchun advocated for more critical reporting, the number and influence of critical reporting reached a new peak. Among the eight journalists of year selected by CCTV in 2003, seven were critical journalists. But the quick rise of critical reporting also led the pushback from the officials of more than a dozen provinces. Jointly filing a

complaint together in 2004, they coalesced to persuade the central government to restrict cross-regional reporting, which caused an ebb tide in critical reporting before it bounced back in 2007. Regardless of the ebb and flow of critical reporting, the CPC leaders were well aware that as a vehicle for oversight and underpinning the media was by nature very limited, even at its best. As much as Zhu (2015) appreciated and advocated in favor of media oversight, he acknowledged that “oversight through public opinion can only do so much – that rule of law is essential” (p. 319). He also didn’t conceal his fatigue with having to intervene in particular cases on a daily basis. In his parting words to the full State Council as prime minister, he said he watched *Topics in Focus* almost every night and always made phone calls to relevant leaders to address the exposed problems. “Sometimes I felt like not making the phone calls because there are so many instances of this sort, but on second thought, I still want to make the calls” (p. 382). For an authoritarian state, deploying the media as a vehicle for oversight and underpinning demands high maintenance in every sense.

Within an ever-changing boundary, Chinese journalists had to always walk a fine line between being critical and being constructive, for which they invented a set of strategies and continuously needed to reinvent them in a fluid context. As much as Chinese critical journalists continued to push the envelope, they were well aware that their oversight power was ultimately derived from the state power rather than a source independent of it. In the words of Yang Haipeng, a veteran investigative journalist, Chinese media’s oversight power is “an extension of the administrative power” by nature (Zhang, 2008, p. 39). The public’s perception of critical reporting also implicitly adopted this view. At its peak, *Topics in Focus* was often compared to be the contemporary of Justice Bao, an ancient Chinese official famous for being upright, which identified the program as the trustworthy part of the regime. Each episode of the program covers

one issue and is thirteen minutes long. “The program can only be thirteen minutes long in contemporary China,” said its producer Liang Jianzeng, because once it is longer the program will have to address the underlying problems of the system, which will be hard to fix (Shi, 2008). In alliance with the regime’s strategy of depoliticization, the program also intentionally downplayed the political nature of news. As Stockmann (2013) found in her field work, this depoliticization strategy has been widely adopted by Chinese media practitioners. Its consequences are two-fold. On the one hand, new areas of reporting were opened up in unprecedented ways. A common lesson often taught by editors to journalists at this era was that any issue can be covered as long as they can find the right way. On the other hand, in pointing out particular problems while excluding criticism of the regime and its policies, the self-censorship of critical journalists also served to strengthen the hegemony of the state (Chan, 2002). As Huntington (1970) noted, “procedural regularity furnishes the dissenter with his opportunity and his opiate” (p. 44).

In sum, the media system was reinvented as a vehicle for oversight and underpinning during the Jiang Zemin administration (1993-2003), which enabled the regime to better adapt to the legal-rational challenges of the adaptation phase. The CCP sponsored the institutional differentiation of the media system through which the latter became institutionally more independent in terms of both reporting and finance while still dominated by the hegemony of the state. As indicated by the CCTV’s reform, the institutional differentiation of the media system was initiated by the Party through the process of depoliticization and further consolidated by the process of commercialization. A closing reading the remarks of Zhu Rongji, the prime minister of the Jiang administration from, further crystalized how the media was conceived as a vehicle for oversight and underpinning. Characterized as regionally decentralized authoritarianism, the

PRC's central government had no direct control over how sub-national government managed regional matters, making it difficult to push through a sweeping market-oriented reform. Zhu's remarks show that media oversight was instrumental in not only combating low level corruption but also "prodding all levels of governments to implement policies" and transforming the government's "style and mode of working" from a player in the market to a regulator of it, all of which were pivotal for building a legal-rational institutional environment demanded by a market economy. Departing from its traditional line about news reporting being primarily positive, the CCP granted media growing leeway on a functional ground. Rather than a clearly defined framework, the media as a vehicle for oversight and underpinning was a moving target that made the media's autonomy fragile. Although there were back and forth, the media also gained more autonomy during the Hu Jintao administration (2003-2013) and developed what Lei (2019) identified as a contentious public sphere in China, which will be discussed in detail in my second paper.

If institutionalization was China's dominant institutional dynamics during the Jiang Zemin administration (1993-2003) and the Hu Jintao administration (2003-2013), then deinstitutionalization has stood out as the new trend since Xi Jinping took power in 2013. In grabbing unprecedented power during the past seven years, Xi has placed China under what Shirk (2018) called a "return to the personalistic rule." A brief comparison between China's major institutional changes under Xi as accounted by Shirk with the key institutional changes under Jiang and Hu as noted by Nathan (2003) shows that the former is a complete reverse of the latter:

(1) In 2018, the PRC passed a constitution amendment to abolish the two-term limit for the president, reversing the institutionalization of orderly succession processes as noted by Nathan earlier.

(2) Xi launched an unprecedented campaign against corruption which allowed him to take down rivals and promote the so-called Xi clan, reversing the institutionalization of meritocratic promotions as noted by Nathan earlier.

(3) As Xi concentrated the power of the Party and state in himself, central government bodies lost the autonomy in policymaking they obtained in the past two decades, reversing the institutionalization of bureaucratic differentiation as noted by Nathan earlier.

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore why the CCP has reversed the course of institutionalization since Xi took over. But China's recent change of course exemplifies what Pepinsky (2013) identified as the central dilemma in the institutionalization of authoritarian countries: "Elites in authoritarian regimes use political institution to structure political order. But these institutions are fundamentally vulnerable to strategic manipulation by the elites" (p. 631). With the reverse of institutionalization under Xi, the previous institutional differentiation of the media system has also been reversed accordingly in major ways:

(1) The reverse of the depoliticization process. When Xi visited three major official news outlets (Xinhua News Agency, *the People's Daily*, CCTV) in 2016, he ordered that "official media make the Party their surname," reversing the depoliticization of media in extremely strong terms (Zhuang, 2016). The once fragmented censorship system was consolidated and centralized, inaugurating what some Chinese Journalists called "the total censorship era" (Jiang, 2018). Liu Wanyong, a leading Chinese investigative journalist, said that more than 100 investigative

reports written by his team had been blocked from 2017 to 2019 due to the tightening censorship, leading him to make the decision to resign (Perlez, 2019).

(2) The collapse of commercial press. The institutional differentiation of the media system in China was mainly achieved through and embodied in the rise and success of a large number of commercial press since 1993. But as the reader and the advertiser accelerated their migration to the internet since the popularization of smartphones, the commercial press industry has been on the brink of collapse in the past decades. More than 100 newspapers have ceased publication since 2009, most of which are commercial newspapers (Zhan, 2019). After suffering from a purge of leadership during the Xi era, leading liberal commercial newspapers such as *the Southern Weekend* and *the Southern Metropolis Daily* no longer hold national influences but are just struggling to survive (Guan, 2020). The digital transformation of liberal commercial media has also been doomed by a very hostile regulatory environment. For example, Qdaily, an innovative and successful online publication, has been continuously harassed by the government in the past two years to the brink of shutdown (Chen et al., 2019). Meanwhile, reliable sources of funding from the state have led to the resurgence of the party organs again, making the industry structure regressed to what it was like before the reform since 1993 (Wang & Sparks, 2019).

(3) The decline of investigative reporting. Once seen as the bearer of the growing independence of China's media, investigative reporting also has suffered a sharp decline amid the collapse of commercial press and the tightening of censorship. In 2015, more than five leading Chinese commercial newspapers disbanded their investigative reporting teams (Ye, 2018). Researchers found that from 2011 to 2017, the number of investigative journalists in China was reduced by half (Zhang & Cao, 2017). Chen (2018) noted that the quick decline of investigative journalists has left crises that were even politically sensitive uncovered. For

example, after a flu pandemic broke out in 2018 in China, there were few reports about it. As of 2019, Liu Hu, a veteran investigative journalist, lamented that “we are almost extinct in China” (Hazelbarth, 2019).

As China’s one-party system went through the process of deinstitutionalization in Xi’s drive towards personalistic rule, the institutional dynamics of media system prevailing before Xi took over were also reversed. With the repoliticization of journalism, the collapse of commercial press, and the exodus of journalists, the media system has lost the political, economic and professional foundation that had boosted its institutional differentiation in the two decades before Xi took over. As Zhan Jiang, a leading Chinese media scholar, told *the New York Times*, “there is hardly any reporting in China now. We have returned to the propaganda of the Mao era” (Perlez, 2019).

Conclusion

Drawing on Huntington’s theory about the evolution of the revolutionary one-party system, this paper reviews the history of the PRC’s media system since 1949 and seeks to develop an overarching framework to understand its trajectory in terms of the regime’s macro institutional dynamics, which have been shifting over the past seven decades. It identifies three major phases driven by distinct institutional dynamics in the PRC’s development and analyzes how the media system was configured and reconfigured during each phase. In the transformation phase (1949-1976), the PRC inaugurated the institutionalization of its media system according to the communist institutional design, which was then reversed in the head-on collision between the charismatic leader Mao Zedong and the institution as a whole during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In the consolidation phase (1976-1992), political parallelism developed in the media system as different factions embraced different visions for post-Mao China, but that

parallelism was then largely erased during the clash between the reformist wing and conservative wing over the 1989 student protest. In the adaption phase (1992-2020), the PRC initiated the institutionalization of its media system under the guise of boosting its legal-rational authority, which has also been reversed in Xi's drive towards a personalist rule. Each phase came full circle by beginning with the institutionalization of the media system in one way or another and ending with its deinstitutionalization, making China's media reform a Sisyphean loop.

The Sisyphean loop in the PRC's media history has three major implications. Firstly, a comprehensive understanding of China's media reforms should take the overall institutional dynamics of the one-party system into account. The media system in a one-party system is influenced by many factors, such as policy, market and technology, but its development in China has proven to be fundamentally shaped by and aligned with the regime's macro institutional dynamics during each phase. Those factors therefore need to be examined holistically in relation to the way the one-party system has maintained its legitimacy. For example, as the discussion in this paper has shown, the marketization of China's media in the 1990s was deeply tied to the regime's efforts to develop a legal-rational institutional environment, and its decline in recent years has also kept in step with the reversal of that development. Secondly, as the one-party system shifts its way of maintaining its legitimacy, which will set new institutional dynamics into motion, the Party will have to readjust its relationship with the media system from time to time. In this sense, the Party continues to have an uneasy relationship with its media system in spite of its domination over it. Media reform therefore is an integral and recurring part of the one-party system's struggles to maintain its legitimacy. Thirdly, given the volatile nature of the institutionalization process in the one-party system, media reform pushed by the regime is

inherently fragile. To fully understand media reform, it is therefore important to understand the particular conditions making it possible and to survey how these conditions may disappear.

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