

China's Media Censorship: A Dynamic and Diversified Regime

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*Media censorship is the hallmark of authoritarian regimes, but much of the motivation and practices of autocratic media censorship still remain opaque to the public. Using a dataset of 1,403 secret censorship directives issued by the Chinese propaganda apparatus, I examine the censorship practices in contemporary China. My findings suggest that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is gradually adjusting its censorship practices from restricting unfavorable reports to a strategy of "conditional public opinion guidance." Over the years, the propaganda apparatus has banned fewer reports but guided more of them. However, this softer approach of regulating news is not equally enforced on every report or by different censorship authorities. First, the party tends to ban news that directly threatens the legitimacy of the regime. In addition, due to the speed with which news and photographs can be posted online, the authorities that regulate news on the Internet are more likely to ban unfavorable reports, compared with authorities that regulate slower-moving traditional media. Lastly, local leaders seeking promotions have more incentive to hide negative news within their jurisdictions than their central-level counterparts, who use media to identify misconduct among their local subordinates. Taken together, these characteristics create a strong but fragmented system of media regulation in contemporary China. **KEYWORDS:** China, censorship, propaganda apparatus, control over media*

MEDIA CENSORSHIP IS THE HALLMARK OF AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES, BUT with an enormous increase in flows of information, it becomes increasingly difficult for any state to completely curb news coverage before it reaches the public (Shirk 2007; Xiao 2011). In fact, a number of scholars suggest that access to uncensored information opens societies and empowers citizens with new tools (Huntington 1991; Rustow 1990; Whitehead 1996). If their prediction is true, authoritarian regimes will face a stark choice between either sealing themselves off hermetically or waiting for their demise. However, this is not what we observe in reality. Take the world's largest authoritarian country—

China—as an example. The amount of unfavorable news that occurs daily on the country's vast landscapes should make censorship a huge challenge for the Communist Party. Yet, the fact that the regime remained safely in power in the wake of the Arab Spring, Tibetan separatist movements, and numerous local protests indicates the leadership's mastery of control over media. How do autocrats adjust their censorship strategies to accommodate the transformation of the media environment? How do autocrats prioritize their censorship agenda given their limited time and resources to regulate news?

I analyze an original dataset that contains 1,403 secret censorship directives issued by the Chinese propaganda apparatus. The directives, revealed anonymously by the Chinese media practitioners who are dissatisfied with the regime, contain firsthand information including the date of the directive, the issuing authority, the news to be censored, and the detailed censorship instructions. Therefore, the dataset provides a rare opportunity to explore the complexity and delicacy of China's media censorship practices. I identify censorship authorities, examine issue areas that are more likely to be regulated and banned, and track how censorship decisions change over the years. My findings suggest that the CCP is gradually adjusting its censorship practices from restricting unfavorable reports to a strategy of “conditional public opinion guidance.” Over the years, the propaganda apparatus has banned fewer reports and guided more of them. However, this softer approach of regulating news is not equally enforced on every report or by different censorship authorities. First, the CCP tends to ban news that directly threatens the legitimacy of the regime. In addition, due to the speed with which news and photographs can be posted online, the authorities that regulate news on the Internet are more likely to ban unfavorable reports, compared with authorities that regulate slower-moving traditional media. Lastly, local leaders who are seeking promotions have more incentive to hide negative news within their jurisdictions than their central-level counterparts, who use media to identify misconduct among their local subordinates. Taken together, these characteristics create a strong but fragmented system of media regulation in contemporary China.

This article makes three primary contributions to the literature. First, it provides the first systematic analysis of a large number of secret censorship directives from the Chinese propaganda apparatus. Previous studies tend to infer the state's motivation for censorship by observing which articles are prohibited or published (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). While this approach generates some useful insights, it

does not fully capture the complexity of China's censorship system. With the fast growth of the Internet and social media, the authorities have begun to adopt a wide range of more subtle strategies in addition to blocking reports. As Link (2013) puts it, "for topics that cannot be avoided because they are already being widely discussed, there are such options as 'mention without hyping,' 'publish but only under small headlines,' 'put only on back pages,' 'close the comment boxes,' and 'downplay as time passes.'" In addition, the authorities pay individuals and companies to post pro-CCP comments to create an image of the party that is democratic and civilian loving. Thus, it is not sufficient to understand China's censorship practices by only examining banned or published articles. My dataset contains detailed information concerning how the authorities direct different types of news reports. This feature allows me to examine the conditions under which the party issues different instructions, and to present a more complete picture of media censorship in China.

Second, this analysis, by examining different censorship patterns of the central and local propaganda authorities, adds more nuances to the existing theories of media censorship in China. The scholarship offers different viewpoints as to what the Chinese government (and more broadly, other authoritarian regimes) is trying to achieve through censoring news reports. Some put forth a state critique theory, which posits that the goal of censorship is to suppress dissent and to prune citizen expression that finds fault with elements of the state, its policies, or its leaders (MacKinnon 2012; Marolt 2011). Others claim that the target of censorship is citizens who join together to express themselves collectively, stimulated by someone other than the government, who seem to have the potential to generate collective action (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). In addition, some scholars point out that autocrats allow a relatively open press to monitor lower-level bureaucrats in order to reduce corruption (Liebman 2011; Lorentzen forthcoming; Shirk 2011) or reward compliance (Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009). My findings show that the motives of censorship vary among different levels of authorities in China. While the central-level actors' priority is to curb news that could directly undermine regime stability, the provincial propaganda apparatus tries to hide local negative news that could hurt officials' political careers. The distinct motives of censorship reflect the fragmented nature of China's authoritarian political system, where policy outcomes are often shaped by incorporating the diverse interests of the local political actors.

Third, this article illustrates the authoritarian regime's ability to adapt to the new media environment brought about by the explosion of information. Political scientists have long expressed the view that liberalized media play a facilitating role in destabilizing authoritarian regimes and contribute to a sociocultural framework conducive to liberal democracy (Huntington 1996; Lerner 1958). However, authoritarian governments are learning to utilize an increasingly free and commercialized media to their advantage. Theoretically, Shadmehr and Bernhardt (2012) show that censorship can be dangerous for a ruler because "no news is bad news," and the ruler gains if he commits to censoring slightly less than his desired level. Lorentzen (forthcoming) argues that deliberately incomplete censorship allows the central government to check on difficult-to-control local officials. Empirically, Stockmann (2013) finds that media marketization strengthens the ability of the Chinese government to disseminate information by boosting credibility of the media's reports. My article adds to the literature by showing two sources of authoritarian resilience involved in China's censorship strategies. First, the CCP's control of media is flexible. Depending on the strategic value of different issue areas, the propaganda apparatus chooses to ban, restrict, or encourage media contents. Second, the censorship strategies change according to the new developments of the media environment. Over time, the authorities choose to ban fewer reports, but guide more of them. The flexibility and adaptability of the censorship strategies help the CCP maintain its political legitimacy despite the arrival of the information era.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section provides relevant background information on the evolution of China's media censorship. After that, I discuss how authoritarian states control media content when information becomes more abundant and spreads more quickly, and I generate some testable hypotheses. The following section outlines the dataset to be analyzed and discusses its limitations. I then analyze the censorship directives and discuss the findings. I conclude with the implications of the censorship strategies on China's political development.

Overview of China's Media Censorship

Before the reform and opening in 1978, China had no journalism, just propaganda (Shirk 2007). The media were the "throat and tongue" of the party, and their role was to spread the CCP's rhetoric to mobilize public support. After 1978, the CCP launched sweeping reforms of the

media industry. The CCP decided to give up its monopoly over the provision of information to the public in order to save the government money and help transform China into a modern, open economy. As a result, magazines, TV, and radio stations that were once the “throat and tongue” of the party began to compete for audiences (Stockmann 2013). However, commercialization by no means relaxed media censorship, as the party continues to monitor and control the content of news through its propaganda apparatus at all levels. Common taboo topics include Tibetan and Uighur separationist movements, political reform and democracy, labor protests, individual human rights activists, and so forth. In recent years, the prevalence of microblogs, online circumvention tools, and overseas Chinese news outlets make it more difficult for the CCP to completely stop the circulation of unwanted topics (Liebman 2011; Shirk 2007; Xiao 2011). However, the party has also developed and implemented the world’s most advanced system for censoring and monitoring online news content. Website administrators employ automated programs and thousands of human censors to screen content generated by the users and delete posts that crossed the lines defined by CCP directives (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). Journalists and ordinary netizens who present a perspective that is in conflict with state propaganda directives face harassment, dismissal, and abuse, while news outlets that carry such material risk closure (Freedom House 2012).

As in the realm of economics, the CCP’s regulation of media also features multilevel management. Institutions at both the central and local levels have the authority to issue censorship directives. At the central level, the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) and the State Council Information Office (SCIO) are the main censors. The CPD has authority over the contents of print media, television, and radio. Operating through its national network of provincial and municipal branches, the CPD sends instructions to publications several times a week by fax or telephone about what topics not to report on and what topics to play down or up. The SCIO,¹ established in 1990, is in charge of regulating the content of Internet news sites by contacting the editors of large websites to orchestrate their coverage of important events. However, as an agency, the SCIO is much less powerful than the CPD, which is arguably one of the most important institutions to the Communist Party (Shirk 2007). Other minor central-level censors include the General Administration of Press and Publication, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Public Security, and so on.

Local governments’ control of media can be traced back to the early 1980s, when the center encouraged lower levels of the state

apparatus to start their own news organizations to increase the flow of information about economic development and rebuild the power of the propaganda system (Esarey 2005). The newly founded media were placed under the “dual responsibility system” that gave management responsibilities to both local governments and the CPD, with the former owning primary authority over media’s day-to-day operations. Although for the most part local officials implement the directives from the CPD, territorial state ownership of the Chinese media created problems for the party in monitoring media content, especially when it came to local negative news. The central government, fighting against widespread corruption and failures of governance, encourages journalists to write exposés of the misbehavior of local officials. But local governments are very much protective of themselves and of their power. Thus, there are often conflicts between the central and local governments in dealing with journalists.

Authoritarian Censorship in the Era of Information

Every dictator dislikes free media (Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009). However, the arrival of the information age, the prevalence of the Internet, and the enormous increase in transboundary flows of information have presented new challenges to the autocrats’ control of media. A few decades ago, official media were the only source of information available to citizens in authoritarian regimes. Now, however, informal news, including pictures taken with smart phones, spreads before the propaganda apparatus can react to it. Previously, the propaganda authorities could effectively prevent the circulation of unwanted information among the public. But now, official media lose credibility if they keep silent in the face of negative reports. How have authoritarian leaders reacted to the transformation of the information environment and coped with new censorship challenges?

During the past two decades, the CCP has been transitioning from banning as much unfavorable information as possible, to what the officials call “dredging and blocking” (*shudu jiehe*), or a combination of guiding public opinion and banning news reports. Compared with outright bans, this strategy offers several advantages. First, public opinion guidance increases the credibility of the party. Citizens understand rulers’ incentives to conceal negative news, so when no news is released, they infer that negative news has been censored (Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2012). Compared with completely blocking information, public opinion guidance promotes consumption and persuasive-

ness. The gains from improving citizens' trust may offset the risks of hiding negative news, which allows the party to disseminate information and shape public opinion in a way conducive to its rule. Second, revealing information enables the party to gauge the public's reaction to sensitive news. Feedback from the audience helps the party evaluate the effectiveness of its censorship practices and informs leaders of any necessary changes. In addition, the public may provide the party with new information, especially at the local level, reducing the information asymmetry that plagues the governance of any huge country. Therefore, with information being more abundant and traveling faster, one should expect to see the following:

H1: Over the years, the propaganda apparatus tends to ban fewer reports and guide more of them.

However, public opinion guidance does not serve dictators in all circumstances. First of all, not all topics are appropriate to guide. Specifically, blocking a news event benefits leaders if the likelihood of citizens' revolting is greater than the likelihood of increasing trust toward the regime following the revealing of information. Certain news, such as human rights abuses and calls for political reforms, is likely to arouse criticism of the regime among the public. Thus, the regime may still prefer to ban news that involves high political risks if reported.

H2: For topics with high political risks, the propaganda apparatus should choose to ban rather than guide news events.

Second, guiding public opinion takes time. The propaganda apparatus needs to craft the tone of each report and decide what aspects of the news to emphasize or ignore. Thus, the faster information travels, the more difficult public opinion guidance becomes. This implies that the authorities in charge of regulating traditional and new media tend to use different censorship strategies.

H3: The SCIO, the institution that is in charge of regulating news on the Internet, should issue more outright bans than the CPD, which oversees the content of traditional media.

Third, not all censors guide public opinion on the same issues. As Lorentzen (forthcoming) argues, the Chinese central government

uses media to reveal the misconduct and malfeasance of local officials. However, local officials, with the right to issue directives to local news media, are incentivized to hide this type of news. Therefore, one should expect to see divergent patterns of censorship at different levels.

H4: Local censorship authorities are more likely than their central counterparts to ban reports.

H5: While the central actors' priority is to regulate news that could directly undermine regime stability, the provincial propaganda apparatus tries to hide local negative news that could hurt officials' political careers.

The rest of the article details my testing of the validity of these five hypotheses by examining the directives from the Chinese propaganda apparatus.

Data

Data for this article were collected from the website of *China Digital Times (CDT)*. *CDT* is an independent, bilingual media organization that brings uncensored news and online voices from China to the world. *CDT* staff members collect the secret directives of the Chinese propaganda apparatus through social media platforms² and Chinese media practitioners who are frustrated—about either a particular directive or the fact of censorship in general (Link 2013). The *CDT* chief editor Xiao Qiang and his staff members check the authenticity of every directive they receive against evidence of actual censorship, and publish all the authentic directives.³ For this analysis, I collected a total of 1,403 directives that were issued from March 2007 to April 2013.

Before analyzing these directives, it is important to be forthright about the limitations of this dataset. These 1,403 directives fall short of the entire number of directives issued by the Chinese propaganda apparatus. Due to the secret nature of these directives, it is difficult to objectively assess the representativeness of the data. Additionally, the ways these directives are collected suggest several sources of potential bias. To begin with, as some of the directives are obtained from online sources, the directives may tend to concentrate on the issues that draw more attention in Chinese society; however, this

source of bias is in fact welcomed for the purpose of my analysis. For one thing, the propaganda apparatus does concern itself more with popular topics, as they are more likely to stir collective actions that threaten social stability. In addition, because the party is more concerned with these topics, the directives in my dataset may cover more detailed orders on the strategies of news control. This feature enables me to explore the multilayered meanings included in the directives to examine the real intention of the censorship authorities. Second, because hot-button issues are more likely to spread nationwide and raise the center's attention, the dataset may bias toward directives issued by the central propaganda apparatus. Consequently, the overall issue distribution of the directives, as well as the ways to regulate different types of news, may reflect more closely the censorship strategies and preferences of the central-level censorship authorities. Third, the dataset may reveal more strict or unreasonable censorship directives in the eyes of Chinese journalists and editors. This implies my analysis may present an "upper bound" of the coercive exercises of the Chinese propaganda apparatus.

One may also question the precondition of issuing these directives. In particular, if editors self-censor topics that are clearly taboo, there may be no need for the censors to issue directives. My interviews with some Chinese media practitioners suggest that this possibility only occurs with regard to some local news. "Self-censor often occurs, but it is simply too risky for the CPD to keep silent when there are separationist movements or human rights abuses going on." Says an experienced Chinese journalist, "as far as I've experienced, self-censorship leads to no directive only when local protests are censored by local media and thus escaped the attention of the CPD." Again, these comments suggest a bias in the directives toward the central-level censors.

Lastly, because the absolute number of the directives in my dataset is much smaller than the true population, most of my analysis will focus on analyzing the distributions of the directives, which are more informative than the absolute number.

Overall Censorship Instructions

My dataset reveals more than thirty different censors at the central and local levels in China, confirming the diversity of the institutional actors involved in regulating media (Shirk 2011). According to Table 1, censors at the central level issued 80 percent of all the censorship

directives in my dataset, while the rest were issued by local institutions. Among the central-level actors, the CPD issued 79 percent of the directives, followed by the SCIO, which issued 18 percent of the directives. At the local level, my dataset contains the directives from twenty-four provincial propaganda departments. Interestingly, 43.3 percent of all the local censorship directives were issued by Guangdong province, which is home to one of China's most popular newspapers—the *Southern Weekend*.

Leaders of the CCP control media using different strategies. In addition to outright bans, media are often instructed to report limited negative news in a short time frame (Brady 2008), to follow the rhetoric of the party mouthpiece, and to post pro-regime news content (Shirk 2011). Indeed, my dataset exhibits various types of instructions the Chinese authorities used to deal with sensitive topics. I classify all censorship directives into four major categories: ban (which means no article of certain news could appear in media); report according to official tones; do not over-report (which means one could report on the news, but not every day and not on the front-page); and encourage to report. Arguably, these four categories represent different levels of freedom of news coverage. Table 2 shows the distribution of these four categories. The most common type of instruction is ban, which represents 57.38 percent of all the directives.

Table 1 Censorship Actors

Actor	Frequency	Percentage
Overall		
Center	1,126	80.26
Local	277	19.74
Total	1,403	100.00
Among center		
Central Propaganda Department	891	79.13
State Council Information Office	202	17.94
Others	33	2.93
Total	1,126	100.00
Among local		
Guangdong province	120	43.3
Others	157	56.7
Total	277	100.00

Notes: This table shows the major censorship actors at the central and local levels. Frequency indicates the number of directives issued by each actor.

Table 2 Overall Censorship Decisions

Decision	Frequency	Percentage
Ban	805	57.38
Report according to official tones	300	21.38
Do not over-report	150	10.69
Encourage report	148	10.55
Total	1,403	100.00

Notes: This table summarizes the censorship decisions of all the directives in my dataset. Frequency indicates the number of directives.

However, over the years the relative frequency of different censoring strategies has changed. Figure 1 plots the total number of the directives and the percentage of the directives that required an outright ban from 2008 to 2012.⁴ Gauging from the absolute number of directives, the years 2008 and 2012 saw more directives than other years.⁵ However, looking at the percentage of banned reports, a slightly different picture emerges. As Hypothesis 1 predicts, while about 65 percent of the directives issued in 2008 required a ban on news events, the number steadily decreased after 2010 to 41 percent in 2012. When breaking down all the directives by issue area, I see similar patterns. Figure 2 shows the percentage of the banned reports by several main issue areas.⁶ All four categories of areas saw a gradual decrease in the percentage of the banned reports from 2008 to 2012.

The fact that fewer reports are banned does not indicate a less repressive censorship regime. Rather, it reflects the state’s transition

Figure 1 Number of Directives and Percentage of Banned Reports

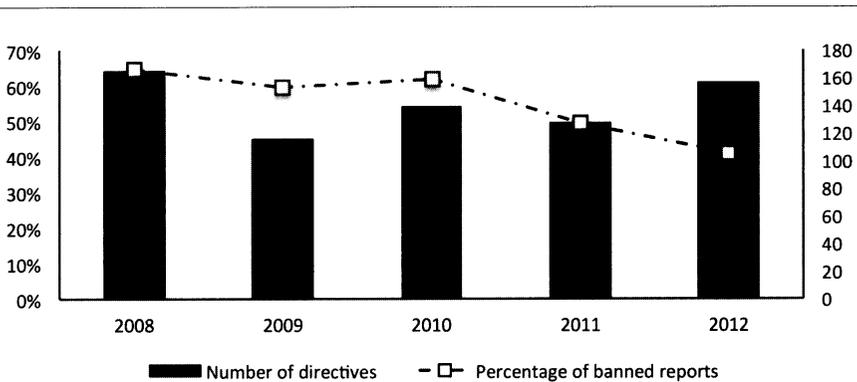
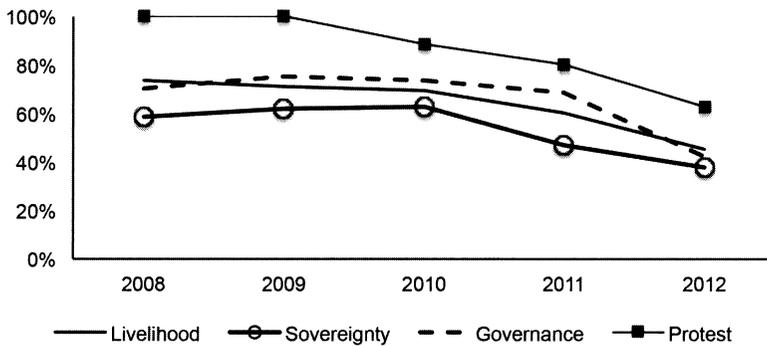


Figure 2 Percentage of Banned Reports by Issue Area

from passive control to active guidance of public opinions. Over the years the authorities have begun to employ more nuanced means to regulate news coverage. The change is well demonstrated in the following two CPD directives during the National People's Congress (NPC) meetings in 2007 and 2013, respectively.

Before the NPC meeting in 2007, the CPD issued the following directive:

The following news and topics should be banned: (1) reports on Cheng Siwei; (2) a journalist wrote an open letter to some NPC deputies; (3) Beijing collected 14,000 signatures to revise the Property Law; (4) news on Beijing Evening News about a woman prosecutor who caught corrupt officials by acting as a prostitute; (5) suggestions by Wenhui News to allow journalists to directly participate in the NPC discussions; (6) anything that is not related to the NPC meeting, but might catch people's attention.⁷

Six years later, the CPD's directive during the 2013 NPC meeting changed significantly:

News related to officials' public disclosure of their assets should not be reported, commented on, or forwarded. Journalists should notify the CPD of any collective incidents that occur during the NPC meeting before reporting such issues. Local media should temporarily stop cross-regional investigative reports. Do not report any anticorruption news that is not verified by the government. Reduce the number of negative reports. Media practitioners should not post online information that is considered politically wrong. Enforce the directives from the SCIO. Reduce the number of reports on interactions among lead-

ers; do not report strange comments from the deputies. Do not caricature the NPC meetings. Increase the reports on the “grassroots” NPC deputies. Forward the reports of the authoritative media. Positively report on “learning from Lei Feng.” Report the diligence and frugality aspects of the meetings and deputies, but do not over-report them.⁸

Concerning the contents of the directives, while the 2007 directive focused on the specific events that happened during the NPC meeting, the 2013 directive covered much broader and high-level topic areas. This change effectively increased the number of reports under the radar of the propaganda apparatus. More importantly, the 2007 directive used a single strategy—ban—to regulate news coverage. But the 2013 directive struck a delicate balance among ban, report according to formal tones, encourage to report, and do not over-report. The party realized that completely banning news from the public has not only become costly, but also reveals the fear and weakness of the regime. On the other hand, strategic public opinion guidance may create the image of a regime that is genuine and responsive to the inquiries of its citizens, making them believe that the state is becoming more transparent and democratic. Seen from this perspective, the fact that fewer bans have been issued in recent years is no reason to be too optimistic about real media freedom in China. Quite to the contrary, a more adaptive and mature propaganda apparatus is critical to autocratic leaders in consolidating their political power.

Censorship Across Different Issues

The CCP’s censorship covers a wide range of issue areas. I categorize all the directives into twenty-seven subcategories as shown in Box 1. Table 3 summarizes overall censorship distribution. The directives are mostly concentrated on officials (13.6 percent), international affairs (11.5 percent), disasters and accidents (10.9 percent), livelihood issues (8.3 percent), and criminal cases (7.6 percent). Contrary to common belief, the propaganda apparatus does not seem to devote a lot of effort to regulating news on political reforms, human rights, or separatist movements.

Because the directives contain different instructions, the issue areas that received the most censorship directives may not be the same as those that are most likely to be banned. To find out which topics are more likely to be banned, I constructed a censorship score for each of the twenty-seven issue areas. The censorship score is the weighted average of the decision scores⁹ across all the directives on

Box 1 Categorization of Issue Areas

I classified all news directives into twenty-seven subcategories, according to the content of news. This section provides information on the criteria of categorization. Note that one directive can belong to multiple subcategories.

Books and films: reports related to books and films that contain pornography or information that is considered disloyal to the Communist Party.

Company misbehavior: reports on companies' monopolistic practices, engagement in corruption, product quality issues.

Corruption: reports on corruptive behavior of both individual officials and companies.

Criminal cases: reports including both cases of court intervention and incidents with extremely negative social influence, such as suicide, child abuse.

Culture and sports: reports on cultural and sporting events such as the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai World Expo.

Deputies: specifically refers to the deputies of the National People's Congress.

Disasters and accidents: reports on natural disasters such as earthquakes, droughts, and floods as well as man-made accidents such as coalmine explosions.

Economics and finance: reports on economic policies, capital regulations, and the stock market.

Farmers: reports on farmers.

Government misbehavior: reports on governments' misbehavior, including failure to deliver disaster relief assistance and officials' mistreatment of citizens.

Historical events: events that happened in the past that had political significance to China today, such as reform and opening up and the May Fourth movement.

Human rights: reports on governments' abuses of human rights, such as the Chen Guangcheng incident and Liu Xiaobo's Nobel prize.

Individuals: reports whose main subjects are individuals including celebrities such as China's liberal blogger Han Han or ordinary people who became famous due to an accident or a case. Most of these individuals are regime critics in some aspect.

International affairs: reports about events that happen in other countries without direct relations to China, and international political and economic events with the participation of China.

continues

Box 1 continued

Livelihood: reports on the environment, education, housing, medical care, and food safety.

Meetings: reports on NPC and party meetings.

Military: reports on military spending, new developments in arms, etc.

Officials: reports on government officials at all levels.

Opinions: include both general opinion pieces criticizing the government and specific advice made to the government.

Party activities: reports on the party's meetings, decisions, and histories.

Policy: reports on laws, policies, and regulations at central and provincial levels.

Political reforms: reports on elections, democracies, the rule of law.

Protests: reports on violent and sit-still protests, petitions, and demonstrations at all levels.

Religion: reports on Tibetan Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity.

Separationist movements: reports on leaders and events of Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan.

Social phenomena: reports on social phenomena that draw much attention from the public, but do not necessarily have a direct impact on individuals' lives, including white-collar monks, *Panthera tigris amoyensis*, etc.

Technology: reports on research and application of high technology.

Table 3 Overall Censorship Distribution

Issue	Percentage	Issue	Percentage
Officials	13.6	Government misbehavior	2.0
International affairs	11.5	Books and films	1.9
Disasters and accidents	10.9	Meetings	1.9
Livelihood	8.3	Economics and finance	1.7
Criminal cases	7.6	Deputies	1.4
Separationist movements	6.8	Party activities	1.3
Individuals	6.6	Farmers	1.2
Policy	5.6	Human rights	1.1
Corruption	5.6	Historical events	1.1
Opinions	5.2	Military	0.9
Protests	4.9	Religion	0.7
Company misbehavior	3.9	Social phenomena	0.4
Culture and sports	3.4	Technology	0.3
Political reforms	3.1		

Note: This table shows the distribution of directives by issue area in percentage.

this particular issue area. The lower the score, the more likely the issue area is to be banned. Table 4 shows the censorship scores of the twenty-seven issue areas. The areas that are most likely to be banned are religion, protests, and individual dissidents; while the areas least likely to be banned are meetings, policies, and party activities. However, note that the table characterizes the directives if the topic attracts the interest of the propaganda authorities. In other words, relatively safe and boring topics do not enter the table.

Compared with the most frequently directed issues in Table 3, the most sensitive issue areas are wildly different. It may seem surprising that the propaganda apparatus does not spend more time on the reports that are considered most threatening to the regime. One explanation may be that events regarding human rights or protests do not happen as frequently as disasters and accidents. But more importantly, these events are so fundamental to the regime that any misguidance will put the party's survival at great risk. Censorship instructions on these news reports are therefore straightforward bans. On the other hand, the issue areas that are most frequently regulated are also those of some strategic value to the party. In other words, if managed carefully, media coverage on these issues may well per-

Table 4 Censorship Scores by Issue Area

Issue Area	Score	Issue Area	Score
Religion	0.30	Livelihood	0.73
Protests	0.30	Deputies	0.74
Individuals	0.45	Military	0.77
Books and films	0.48	Government misbehavior	0.79
Human rights	0.50	Disasters and accidents	0.83
Separationist movements	0.53	Historical events	0.87
Criminal cases	0.53	International affairs	0.93
Company misbehavior	0.54	Technology	1.00
Political reforms	0.55	Social phenomena	1.00
Opinions	0.59	Culture and sports	1.28
Farmers	0.59	Meetings	1.42
Officials	0.62	Policy	1.46
Corruption	0.65	Party activities	1.83
Economics and finance	0.71		

Notes: This table shows the censorship scores by issue area. The censorship score is the weighted average of the decision scores across all directives on this particular issue area. Every ban decision receives a score of 0, reporting according to official tones corresponds to a score of 1, do not over-report translates to a score of 2, while encourage report indicates a score of 3. The lower the score, the more likely the issue area is to be banned.

suade the public to support the party. These patterns confirm Hypothesis 2, which states that the propaganda apparatus tend to ban more reports on topics with high political risks.

A more formal way to look at the likelihood of bans across issue areas is through regressions. To save some degrees of freedom, I combine the twenty-seven issue areas into ten main categories.¹⁰ I use two dependent variables as proxies for the levels of censorship. The first dependent variable “report” is a binary one, with 0 meaning a ban and 1 meaning to report. The second dependent variable “decision” is a categorical variable. This variable takes on four values: 0 means a ban, 1 means report according to the formal tone, 2 means do not over-report, and 3 means encourage to report. The lower the value, the more likely a type of issue is to be banned. Table 5 shows the results of both OLS and ordered probit (probit in the binary case) specifications. News reports regarding sovereignty, governance, opinions, and societies were more likely to be banned, while news reports regarding economics and international news were less likely to be banned. Substantively, if a piece of news is about economic and finance policy it increases the probability of reporting by 0.14, while if a piece of news is about sovereignty it decreases the probability of reporting by 0.22. Results are consistent across specifications.

Censorship Strategies Among Different Central-Level Censors

Hypothesis 3 predicts that the censorship instructions vary among institutions responsible for regulating different types of media. As shown in Table 6, the SCIO is more likely to ban news than the CPD. While 50.62 percent of the CPD’s directives required a ban on certain news reports, 73.27 percent of the SCIO directives required the same action. On the other hand, the CPD issued more directives to report according to official tones or to not over-report than the SCIO. The two institutions are similar in terms of the percentage of directives that encouraged positive news coverage.

The CPD and the SCIO also issued different instructions regarding the same news. On July 23, 2011, two trains collided near Wenzhou, killing more than forty people and injuring hundreds. The CPD issued the following instruction regarding the issue:

Media should report the information released by the Ministry of Railways in a timely manner. Media must report the number of casualties according to official reports. Reporting frequency on this issue needs

Table 5 Likelihood of Censorship by Major Categories of Issue Areas

	Report OLS	Ordered Probit	Decision OLS	Probit
Company	-0.20*** (0.06)	-0.56*** (0.20)	-0.27* (0.15)	-0.43* (0.21)
Culture	-0.08 (0.05)	-0.21 (0.14)	-0.02 (0.12)	-0.07 (0.14)
Foreign	0.14*** (0.05)	0.36*** (0.12)	0.11 (0.10)	0.17 (0.10)
Governance	-0.07** (0.03)	-0.19** (0.09)	-0.25*** (0.07)	-0.27*** (0.08)
Opinions	-0.17*** (0.05)	-0.46*** (0.15)	-0.27** (0.11)	-0.38** (0.15)
Party	0.04 (0.04)	0.10 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.08)	0.00 (0.09)
Policy	0.14*** (0.05)	0.36*** (0.14)	0.36*** (0.12)	0.38*** (0.13)
Political reform	-0.02 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.17)	-0.17 (0.12)	-0.16 (0.15)
Society	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.20* (0.11)	-0.18** (0.08)	-0.23** (0.10)
Sovereignty	-0.22*** (0.06)	-0.57*** (0.16)	-0.29** (0.10)	-0.47*** (0.14)
<i>Constant</i>	0.46*** (0.04)	-0.09 (0.10)	0.89*** (0.07)	

Notes: Table shows OLS, ordered probit, and probit regressions of censorship decisions on various issues. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors are in parentheses. Models 1 and 2 use a binary dependent variable, which indicates whether the report should be banned or restricted. Models 3 and 4 use a categorical dependent variable, which reveals the degree of censorship on each report.

Table 6 CPD and SCIO Censorship Decisions (in percentage)

Decision	CPD	SCIO	Difference
Ban	50.62	73.27	22.65*** (0.04)
Report according to official tones	25.14	11.88	-13.26*** (0.03)
Do not over-report	12.12	2.48	-9.64*** (0.02)
Encourage report	12.12	12.38	0.26 (0.03)

Notes: This table compares the censorship decisions of the CPD and the SCIO in percentage. The difference column shows the pairwise t -tests of the difference in each type of censorship decision. *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors are in parentheses.

to be controlled. Media needs to report more on the citizens who donated their blood, and the taxi drivers who drove the injured to the hospitals. Do not investigate the causes of the accident. Do not comment or reflect on this accident.¹¹

The directive from the SCIO on the same day was quite different:

Any articles other than one recent update regarding the Wenzhou train accident should not appear on any website, especially the front pages. All websites should implement this directive immediately; the SCIO will check the result of implementation in 30 minutes.¹²

Again, in this case, the SCIO seemed to be more repressive than the CPD in requiring immediate bans of related reports. However, on some issue areas, the decisions of the CPD and the SCIO were the same. For example, after a violent separationist movement in Xinjiang in July 2009, both institutions issued directives to ban any report on this sensitive topic. The differences in the censorship directives can be explained by the types of media the two institutions are regulating. The SCIO regulates websites, which post breaking news much faster than traditional media. In addition, the Internet offers individuals the means to write and disseminate their commentaries and to coordinate collective actions. These features of new media require the regulators to act quickly when unfavorable news breaks out, resulting in a higher percentage of banned news. The CPD's control over traditional media, on the other hand, is purposefully "softer." One reason for softer control is that traditional media's relatively slow speed of reporting gives the CPD time to guide news coverage. In addition, guiding rather than banning news may also serve to protect the credibility of traditional media. Consumers may have read the news on websites before reading newspapers or watching TV. Should traditional media keep silent on unfavorable news, they are likely to be perceived by the public as having low credibility.

Censorship Strategies Between the Central and Local Censors

The directives vary not only among the central authorities, but also between the central and local ones. Table 7 shows the differences in the directives from the central and local propaganda apparatus. Fifty-five percent of the central directives and 63.9 percent of the local ones required a ban on certain news reports, respectively. In addition, while 11.8 percent of the central directives encouraged news cover-

age on certain issues, only 5.4 percent of the local directives conveyed similar messages. Pairwise t-tests indicate these differences are statistically significant at conventional levels, confirming the prediction of Hypothesis 4. The fact that local institutions seem to be more repressive than their central counterparts is understandable, given the career incentives of local officials. Too much unfavorable news at the local level is likely to negatively affect the center's perceptions of the abilities of local leaders and thus their prospects for political promotion. In addition, the time and skills required to guide public opinion preclude some local officials from using this less coercive strategy. According to my interview with a government official in Shanghai, "we (the local propaganda apparatus) would rather play conservative by suppressing the report rather than telling them (the media) how to report," because "we will be blamed by the CPD if the guidance is perceived as politically incorrect."¹³

In addition to overall censorship decisions, I also take a closer look at the issue areas that central and local propaganda apparatus focus on. Table 8 reports the twelve issue areas on which the central and local institutions differ the most. The central censorship institutions issued more directives on international affairs (13.1 percent vs. 5.1 percent), separationist movements (7.0 percent vs. 2.9 percent), political reforms (3.6 percent vs. 1.4 percent), human rights (1.4 percent vs. 0 percent), and military reports (1.2 percent vs. 0 percent). On the other hand, local actors issued more directives on officials (17.3 percent vs. 12.7 percent), livelihood (11.2 percent vs. 7.6 percent), disasters (13.7 percent vs. 10.2 percent), criminal cases (7.7 percent vs. 4.2 percent), and corruption (5.8 percent vs. 1.6 percent). These variations reveal the different focuses of these institutions. As predicted by Hypothesis 5, local censors tend to use censorship directives as instruments to hide official misbehavior and local protests, disasters, and accidents. The central propaganda apparatus, on the other hand, regulates relatively more reports on international affairs, separationist movements, human rights, and so forth. It seems that the central-level authorities censor news for two purposes. The first is to ensure the stability of the regime. Like all politicians, Chinese leaders are concerned first and foremost about their own survival. Since issue areas such as human rights, separationist movements, and political reforms all have the potential to stir revolutionary acts among regime critics, it is imperative for the party to regulate or ban such topics. The second purpose is to prevent the government from becoming hostage to public opinion. Such concern is well demonstrated through the center's control on foreign reports. In the midst of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island disputes last year, the CPD contin-

Table 7 Central and Local Censorship Decisions (in percentage)

Decision	Center	Local	Difference
Ban	55.8	63.9	8.1** (0.03)
Report according to official tones	22.3	17.7	-4.6 (0.03)
Do not over-report	10.1	13.0	2.9 (0.02)
Encourage report	11.8	5.4	-6.4*** (0.02)

Notes: This table compares the censorship decisions of the central and local actors in percentage. The difference column shows the pairwise t-tests of the difference in each type of censorship decision. ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Table 8 Central and Local Emphasis on Censorship (in percentage)

Issue	Center	Local	Difference
International affairs	13.1	5.1	0.08*** (0.016)
Separationist movements	7.0	2.9	0.048*** (0.013)
Political reforms	3.6	1.4	0.022* (0.012)
Human rights	1.4	0.0	0.014*** (0.004)
Military	1.2	0.0	0.012* (0.003)
Officials	12.7	17.3	-0.046** (0.010)
Livelihood	7.6	11.2	-0.036** (0.020)
Disasters and accidents	10.2	13.7	-0.035* (0.021)
Criminal cases	4.2	7.7	-0.034** (0.017)
Corruption	1.6	5.8	-0.042*** (0.010)

Notes: This table shows the directive distribution of the central and local propaganda apparatus in selective issue areas in percentage. The top panel shows the issue areas on which the central actors focused more. The bottom panel shows the issue areas on which the local actors focused more. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors are in parentheses.

uously issued three directives, requiring media to report according to the statements of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and prohibiting any report on Chinese citizens' self-organized activities to protect the island. The leadership intended to tone down the harsh rhetoric, because too much patriotism from the public can trigger protests that force the government into a confrontation with other countries.

Conclusion

In this article I illustrate the emergence of a dynamic and diversified censorship regime in China. It is dynamic because the strategies of regulating media have changed over time. It is diversified because different censorship authorities, with their respective goals, regulate media content in different ways. The diversified aspect of the censorship regime certainly creates some constraints for the party: the often conflicting preferences of the central and local censors indicate that the center's intention to monitor subordinate officials and to identify problems can be mitigated by local governments' efforts to suppress negative reports. The information asymmetry may pose potential threats to the state to the extent that some local issues may provoke popular unrest. Despite these challenges, however, the censorship authorities have become more sophisticated in regulating media. From simply blocking news coverage to selectively planning reporting strategies, the Chinese government is adopting a variety of innovative censorship practices to stamp out political challenges and propagate positive images of the state. These changes have contributed to the regime's resilience despite rampant corruption, an increasing number of protests, and deepening inequality between the rich and the poor. Seen from this perspective, the fight for Chinese citizens' right to know will remain difficult in the near future.

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Notes

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1. In addition to regulating online content, the SCIO also manages relations with the foreign press corps, oversees China's international radio service, and tries to help the world see China in a positive light.

2. Including Twitter, Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter), and Internet forums.

3. The available directives cover almost all the politically sensitive topics that one can think of from the past seven years (such as separationist movements in Tibet, dissidents such as Liu Xiaobo, Falun Gong, the Tiananmen Massacre, religion, and corruption at the top).

4. I exclude directives from 2007 because the available directives begin in the middle of the year. Similarly, I exclude directives from 2013 because the dataset ends in April.

5. This result is expected. In 2008, China was struck by the Tibet separationist movements during the Olympic torch relay in March and April, and the disastrous Wenchuan earthquake in May. In addition, the government adopted temporary measures to prevent destabilizing protests in the run-up to the Olympic games in August. In 2012, the 18th Party Congress and the large-scale leadership transitions drove up the number of directives. During the last two months of the year, the CPD alone issued at least seventy-nine directives.

6. Unfortunately, not all issue areas are shown here, because some issue areas do not contain enough directives for a meaningful illustration in percentages.

7. Retrieved and translated from the *China Digital Times*.

8. Ibid.

9. Every ban decision receives a score of 0, reporting according to official tones corresponds to a score of 1, do not over-report translates to a score of 2, and encourage report indicates a score of 3.

10. The ten major categories comprise the twenty-seven subcategories of directives as follows: sovereignty (separationist movements, religion); foreign (international affairs); company (company misbehavior); party (officials, deputies, meetings, party activities, military); policy (economics and finance, government misbehavior, policy); governance (human rights, corruption, criminal cases, protests, disasters and accidents); opinions (opinions); society (individuals, farmers, livelihood, social phenomena); political reform (political reforms, historical events); and culture (culture and sports, books and films, technology).

11. China Digital Times, July 23, 2011, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2011/07/%E4%B8%AD%E5%AE%A3%E9%83%A8%EF%BC%9A%E6%B8%A9%E5%B7%9E%E5%8A%A8%E8%BD%A6%E8%BF%BD%E5%B0%BE%E4%BA%8B%E6%95%85/> (in Chinese; accessed May 21, 2013).

12. China Digital Times, July 23, 2011, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2011/07/%E5%9B%BD%E6%96%B0%E5%8A%9E%EF%BC%9A%E6%B8%A9%E5%B7%9E%E5%8A%A8%E8%BD%A6%E4%BA%8B%E6%95%85/> (in Chinese; accessed May 21, 2013).

13. Author interview with government official, Shanghai, in April 2013.

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