MEDIA AT WORK IN CHINA AND INDIA

Discovering and Dissecting

Edited by
Robin Jeffrey
and
Ronojoy Sen

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Media Control as Stability Maintenance: The Case of the Sichuan Earthquake

Ming Xia

Ming Xia, who started his career in political science three decades ago in Shanghai, is a professor at the City University of New York at the Graduate Center and the College of Staten Island. He has published three books on political governance and transition in China, co-edited books on the Falun Gong and Nobel Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, and written more than a hundred articles. His involvement in making the Oscar-nominated documentary, China's Unnatural Disaster: The Tears of Sichuan Province, led him (a Sichuan native) to write this chapter on the relationship between the state and media in China.

Having emerged as a unique twentieth-century phenomenon, totalitarianism (both fascist and communist) separates itself from all previous autocracies by its cross-the-board incorporation of modern technology into technique and mechanism of political control. Entering the twenty-first century, which was foremost defined by globalization, the Chinese state has become more aggressive but more sophisticated in relying on new technologies for improving its efficiency in political control. Technology's dubious application in human society is clearly demonstrated in the role of media technology for the existing Chinese regime. As political scientists already realized decades ago, "there is a peculiarly intimate relationship between the political process and the communications process" and "the state of politics is a function of the communications process." It is important to take mass communication as an access...
point to examine the negotiation between the Chinese state and the citizens over the nature of political governance and political life. This approach provides a way to understand how under the communist rule for more than 60 years, the Chinese state has been transforming itself from a draconian totalitarian system to a resilient authoritarianism.3

"TINA" (There Is No Alternative) politics has been the signature of Chinese communist rule. Starting with an infallible and irreplaceable "wise and great leader" Mao Zedong, its content has shifted to an emphasis upon the unchallengeable ruling Party, and as a part of the package, the indisputable development vision and sometimes policies impervious to deliberation and contestation. However, in terms of the style, there has been a smooth glide from an Orwellian "Big Brother" state to a Huxleyan "Brave New World," wherein the former people were denied choice under the terror of poverty and deprivation and in the latter, people are programmed or intoxicated to embrace false consciousness under "comfortable unfreedom."4 During the 10 years of Hu (Jintao) and Wen (Jiabao) partnership (2003–2013, the two stepped down in March 2013), the "Beijing consensus" and "China model" were constructed with an ambition to challenge the dominant liberal democracy. Now, as the Chinese Party-state has tried to convince its people that "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is the "sole correct pathway," to manufacture, promote and sustain this idea has become a huge enterprise. A comprehensive and ambitious media campaign has been carried out on domestic and global fronts. Such projects include "The Great Fire Wall" to control the Internet; the closing down of Google search service in the Mainland; the promotion of Chinese soft power by establishing Confucius Institutes to reach a target of 500; and the "Great Foreign Propaganda Campaign" that in 2009 was allocated 45 billion Yuan (more than US$7 billion)5 to take over or support Chinese media overseas, infiltrate the foreign news market, attack websites maintained by Chinese political dissidents and fabricate positive "foreign news coverage" for internal consumption. The Chinese and the people all over the world have been witnessing the most expensive and sophisticated "propaganda campaign" since the fall of Nazi fascism and the Soviet empire.

In this chapter, I focus on the episode of Sichuan earthquake in 2008 to illustrate the state-media relationship in China. The Chinese media, which still hold an image of a semi-bureaucratic establishment despite their embracing marketization and commercialization, are often caught in the conflict between the Party (CPC) and its people.6 Under a static structural and bureaucratic model, multi-layered control mechanisms have been imposed upon the media to keep them closer to the Party line than the Mass line. After the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, the Party mobilized the mass media to create a well-coordinated campaign for presenting a positive image and accomplishment of the state triumvirate—the Party, the state and the Army—in order to shore up the legitimacy of the regime by means of education of patriotism and nationalism.7 But to the surprise of a Party-state unprepared for the uncertainties that lay ahead, the grievances of parents whose children were killed in the collapsed school buildings prompted them to organize protests and appeal to the mass media for support. In response, a meticulously controlled mass media tried to intercept them in between the bureaucracy and protesters, some discovered and asserted their existential subjectivity in counterbalancing the instrumentality imposed by the Party.

Based upon a field trip to the Sichuan Earthquake zone in 2008, I present a dynamic model to illustrate a complex competition between the protesters and the government. The former wanted to recruit the mass media to witness and record their efforts to redress their grievances. The latter wanted to enforce an exclusion of the media from the massive demonstrations. This chapter examines how the presence of media helped socialize the scope of conflict against the wish of the government to keep it private and how it radically transformed the context of conflict. On the one hand, it curtailed the arbitrary use of power by the government and boosted the weak and marginalized protesters; on the other hand, it empowered the protesters and created a strong potential to encourage bystanders to become participants. This chapter discusses under what circumstances the media could quickly switch from being the traditional helpmate of the government into an ally of protesters against the interest of the government in an unexpected crisis.

The Background: The Year 2008 and the Wenchuan Earthquake

For China, the year 2008 was destined to become "a year of great significance." The People's Daily New Year's editorial, which was
entitled, “Greeting the Great Year of 2008 with Joy,” anticipated: “The year 2008 will be an important chapter in the annals of achieving the great renaissance of the Chinese nation.” This heightened anticipation was due to the coming Beijing Olympiad in the summer and the 30th anniversary of China’s “reform and opening up era.”

Not to miss a golden opportunity to showcase China’s great achievements and to reintroduce itself as a great power onto the world stage, the Chinese Party-state formulated a clear political agenda to promote patriotism and nationalism among the people, and carefully stage a series of extravagant activities to shore up its own legitimacy. The Party-state lessened its control over mass media, and the foreign media especially were granted more freedom to conduct interviews. Building upon the momentum of increasing transparency and accountability in the government since 2004 after the SARS crisis, a series of state regulations and laws were passed to provide standards for how to respond to unexpected public crises, to require speedy release of information with more accuracy and to promise people the right to know, in particular with regard to disaster-related information that used to be concealed under the excuse of maintaining state secrets and social stability. For example, in 2007, “The Emergency State Law” (突发事件应对法) was passed and implemented. Meanwhile, “The Open Government Information Regulations” (政务信息公开条例) were passed and set to take effect on 1 May 2008. Specifically serving the needs of the Beijing Olympiad, the central government passed The Regulations for the Interview by Foreign Media during the Olympic Games (有关奥运期间外媒体采访的规定), which stipulated that from 1 July 2007 to October 2008 when the Beijing Olympiad concluded, foreign media were granted more access and freedom to conduct interviews in China. One concession was that foreign media could interview people without the pre-approval from the government.9

Although the lessening of control over the foreign media was intended for a specific period and exclusively for interview and reporting to serve the needs of the Olympiad, the two-front liberalization in both the management of information and control of media created an environment for more aggressive and creative coverage of China in terms of scope and depth. It was like déjà vu of 1989 when Western media swarmed to Beijing to cover the historic visit of Mr. Gorbachev intended to turn a new page in Sino-Soviet relationship.

Then, unexpectedly, the Western media were on the ground for the massive protests and the massacre at the Tiananmen Square.10 Before the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympiad, two big events were more newsworthy because of their surprising eruption at the time of the stage-managed Olympic extravaganza. The two events were the political riots by Tibetans in March and the earthquakes in May.

The fact that protest movements can exert an amplified impact often results from two factors. First, intense repression releases an explosion of resistance. Second, the resistant force has found and exploited a convenient stage, created by the powerful, on which to vent its counter-hegemonic grievances. As for the first, the weak and the marginalized in China were conveniently sacrificed under the name of order and security. As for the second, the state-sponsored Olympic torch relays worldwide were turned into a battleground by human rights activists and Tibetan supporters, especially in the major cities of the West, such as London, Paris and Los Angeles, to expose the widespread abuses of human rights in China. The Lhasa riots in Tibet on 14 March 2008 were not covered in an open and fair way in the official media. The international and unofficial Chinese media (such as microblogging and Twitter) revealed information that proved costly for the Chinese government’s public relations and public image in the world.

On 12 May 2008, a massive earthquake at the Richter scale of 8 hit Sichuan province. According to the official statistics released weeks after the quake, 69,195 people were killed, 18,403 remained missing and among the dead, 5,335 were school children. About 14,000 schools were damaged and 7,000 of them collapsed.11 The official death tolls for students were contested by people. For example, artist Ai Weiwei organized his volunteers to collect and list the names of killed students. Within one year, his list reached 5,205. Ai believed that since his team had not visited some known schools that suffered serious damage, this number could easily go beyond 6,000.12 Another research report written by Dr. Feng Congde, the former student leader of the Tiananmen hunger strike and a native from the Sichuan quake zone, estimated the death toll for students and teachers ranged from 13,000 to 19,000. Feng’s high-end estimate was corroborated by Wei Hong, Vice Governor of Sichuan, in a news conference (later the government retracted the revelation as “a slip of the tongue”) in November 2008, who gave the number as 19,065.13 Understandably, the massive
collapse of school buildings and the accurate number of killed students became the lightning-rod that attracted attention and questioning from all directions.

The Wenchuan Earthquake was sandwiched between the Tibetan riots and the Beijing Olympics. Thus, the activism of the news media and the state’s crisis management during the quake were conditioned by a unique transitional period from a more relaxed and open atmosphere to a suppressive one. The central government sent out new instructions for the coverage of the quake by the media, and the News Office of the Sichuan provincial government replaced interview permits with new ones specific to foreign media in the quake zone. Meanwhile, President Hu Jintao urged China’s domestic media to “maintain strict propaganda discipline,” “properly guard the gate” and “manage the extent of reporting” on major, sensitive and hot topics.”14 Later, Hu would confront more challenges, including the controversy over the Olympic Games, the Melamine-tainted milk crisis and the global financial crisis. The year drew to a close with the release of the CD “Chinese Democracy” by the Guns N’ Roses band and the arrest of political activist Dr Liu Xiaobo for initiating The Charter 08 Movement to demand freedom and democracy for China; he won the Nobel Prize in Peace in 2010.

The Protest Movements and the Tensions between Mass Media and the State

On 22 May 2008, 10 days after the earthquake, I arrived at the quake zone with a team of filmmakers (Directors/Producers Jon Alpert and Matthew O’Neil, and Peter Kwong, professor of sociology at the City University of New York), which was financed by HBO Documentary for making a documentary film on the disaster. The invitation to include me into the team was probably due to the three factors: I am a native of Sichuan; I have done most of my research on local governance in China; and I had travelled to the region just one year before the earthquake. My observation is based upon my field trip to the earthquake zone from 22 May to 1 June 2008. On the first day, our team was divided into two groups and visited two cities separately. Although we visited two most devastated townships (Hanwang in Mianzhu and Xiangge in Dujiangyan), we went collapsed school sites and saw a heavy presence of police, the military police and army soldiers, we did not encounter any trouble from the authorities.

In the aftermath of Wenchuan Earthquake, a “tectonic change” happened to news reporting and coverage. The Chinese official media launched the “most intense,” “most open” and “longest news bombing” in Chinese history.15 This phenomenon was a result of several converging factors. First, “The Open Government Information Regulations” took effect on 1 May and created a liberalizing atmosphere for the new media. Most likely under the slogan of “taking people-oriented approach” from the leadership and a belief that the earthquake was a “typically natural disaster,” the government held a more open attitude toward the press; this was the first litmus test of its sincerity to abide by its own law. The press was encouraged and emboldened to be more responsive to the disaster, more aggressive in reporting and more open about the traditionally forbidden topics. Second, Premier Wen Jiabao was a skillful media spinner who carefully exploited the event to project him as a “People’s Premier” and to create an amicable image of “Grandpa Wen.”16 He brought reporters from the central news agencies with him and held his first news conference on the airplane as he was flying to Sichuan two hours later. On 24 May, when the chilling effect of retraction already was felt by reporters on the ground, Mr Wen held another unique news conference on the ruins in the epicentre to reaffirm that “this rescue work has adopted openness as the guideline,” and he reiterated his support and welcome to foreign reporters.17 Furthermore, facing the enthusiastic participation of citizens with cameras in their mobile phones and microblogs and Twitter as their outlets, the mainstream media were pressed even harder to not let unofficial channels scoop the news. This rare opportunity released the “professional instinct” of reporters based upon their professional trainings.18 A laissez faire and even an anarchic situation characterized the state-media relationship before the bureaucracy fully recovered and formulated a coherent response strategy.

But it was immature to predict the birth of a new “open and transparent China” out of the quake.19 On 18 May, the State Council announced 19 May as the “National Mourning Day” for the dead; the entire country would observe mourning for three days. On 22 May, the
government and official media started to steer the entire country from the rescue mode to the recovery mode. Saving life gave way to restoring order. One commentator called on the Chinese: “Wipe out the tears, start a new march with the nation-state.” The Chinese Party-state quickly resumed its upper hand over the press and mass media.

My field trip started in parallel with this transition. During this period, the parents created memorials on many school sites and gathered there to mourn their lost loved ones. In the Fuxin Primary School where our team shot most of the footage, the parents carefully lined up more than one hundred school bags in different colours next to the uncollected sneakers and surreal rubble. As the parents decorated the memorial with framed colour pictures and banners, other visitors brought more wreaths and flowers. The site quickly turned into a forum for the parents to tell visitors and the media about how the school was not properly built and how their rescue was not helped quickly enough by either the army or local authority. To add insult to injury, the local officials stayed away from the site and underreported the death toll by half to the higher authority.

Interestingly, the Chinese government decided on the “National Mourning Day” by referring to a tradition that the seventh day after an event is an important time for observation. The parents who lost their children chose the second seventh day (i.e. 14 days after the event) as a crucial day for their protest. Local people believe that after two weeks, the soul of the dead leaves this world to the other world. After the National Mourning period, the parents shifted to their active mode to demand official explanations for what had happened to the schools and their children and moved their “forum” or “arena” to the streets where they protested in a march. This turn obviously ran against official signals.

On Sunday, 25 May 2008, our team was searching for stories as the hired Chinese driver carried us in an SUV. By asking around, I got a clue from a local farmer that a primary school named Fuxin lost 128 students and that day the grieving parents were marching out of their school site. They planned to go 100 miles to the provincial capital to petition the higher authority for an investigation into the shoddily built schools. Our team with two video cameras and two regular cameras was one of the few media crews present at the very beginning of the march. Although New York Times photographer Shiho Fukada was probably the earliest Western reporter, since she is Japanese, she was not so eye-catching compared to the two white men with video cameras in our team. A photographer in a black T-shirt with the “Police” sign was active in taking pictures, in particular zooming in on our team.

Jiang Guohua, the municipal Party Secretary and the Chairman of the municipal people’s congress in Mianzhu, was running with the marching parents, trying to persuade them to stop and to talk to him. Despite being frustrated and humiliated, Jiang was responsive and self-restrained to the media. Chen Zhengquan, the deputy mayor and police chief of Deyang City (which is one level higher than Mianzhu in the administrative hierarchy) also rushed to meet the parents who had already walked 20 kilometres and appealed to them to have a talk with the Deyang authority, instead of going to the higher level of authority, the provincial capital. Surrounded by cameras and foreign media, Chen showed his annoyance towards us on his face but did not order his officers to interfere with us.

The local authority realized that the public protest and the march could ruin the political careers and fortunes of many officials and cause a snowballing effect: the march had attracted more bystanders and encouraged some to bring in their grievances. Some brawls broke out among the crowd. Party Secretary Jiang told an interviewer later that “A fuse could easily lead to an explosion of complex conflicts, if the march had been exploited by the people with ulterior motives, and the consequence could be beyond imagination.” He was told by his assistant that another group of angry parents were also gathering in another school at Hanwang only 1 km away. Fearful of a riot in the making, he could not restrain himself from kneeling down in front of the angry parents four times. One government official kept reminding the agitated bystanders that they should control themselves and present a good image for the Chinese nation in front of “foreign friends.” Very soon, Deputy Mayor Chen brought in two big buses to transport the marchers to a government official compound, offering promises to listen to their grievances and to find solutions as soon as possible. The parents, in particular the leaders of the march, discussed among themselves the trade-off about whether to go with the Mayor or to continue the march. They decided that they would go with the buses only if the media were allowed to accompany them. The government officials allowed the media to travel with the parents.

In the bus, the parents were concerned about the possibility that the government would treat them roughly behind closed doors, so
they insisted on getting off the bus outside of the compound gate and insisted with the government officials for a guarantee that they would be treated fairly and have the freedom to come out. As they were escorted into an auditorium where lunch and medical supplies were prepared with medical personnel on site, the parents were further afraid of being isolated from the media. A female deputy mayor of Deyang, Ms Song Yuhua who was in charge of education and health affairs, used her charm to convince the parents that “On the territory of the People’s Republic of China, citizens are guaranteed the freedom of movement.” One mother complained that “We have been cheated to have only fears left. We have no trust in officials.” The parents insisted on inviting the media to accompany them into the auditorium. But the government officials (many from the Party propaganda department) and police officers tried to separate the parents from the media by arguing that the parents needed rest, relaxation and counseling and not being bothered. Some local TV station crews (some from other provinces, such as Yunnan) were more cooperative. One female reporter from the official Xinhua News Agency tried to enter the auditorium and was stopped. After she protested the refusal to allow reporters in, a male official from the propaganda department pushed her out rudely. The surrounding local officials even started inspecting her credentials and pointed out that one more red stamp was needed for a full validation. Even when the Xinhua reporter threatened to publicize what was happening on the next day’s Xinhua News Net, which represents the highest authority in Chinese official news bureaucracy, the local officials did not budge.22

Our team was treated with less physical aggression because we had four strong men and could manoeuvre around to find opportunity. In order to calm us down and get rid of us as soon as they could, the officials later allowed two of us with one camera to shoot some snapshots in the stadium as the parents were eating their lunch. Then all the media personnel were kept out of the stadium as they were carrying on the dialogue and the executive deputy mayor of Deyang, Zhang Jinming, made a speech. Our team was also approached by three police officers who identified themselves as the “police officers for foreign affairs” from the municipality of Deyang. They attempted to check our passports, press credentials and visa types. Since we did not show them, we were warned to stop our activities. Unexpectedly at 4:21 PM, an aftershock at the Richter scale 6.4 hit the region and the buildings shook and tiles fell. The parents had to be evacuated outdoors to a basketball court. This made it more difficult for the officials to keep the media off limits. With our begging and schmoozing, the city director for foreign affairs on the site allowed our cameras to come close to the crowd for some shots. The mayors (both Zhang and Song) gave the parents three promises: (a) They would inspect the school site the next day. (b) They had already created an investigation team led by senior engineers from the provincial capital to start the investigation about the quality of school buildings. (c) The investigation would be finished within a month and a final investigation report would be released to determine whether there were wrongdoings and who should take the responsibilities. Finally, the parents agreed to be sent back to their villages by the government-provided buses.

In the following two days, to avoid any confrontation with the police, we decided to interview parents at home or in the field. On 27 May, as we were returning to the Fuxin Township, we stumbled into another protest. About 100 parents from Hanwang Township were blocking the highway and demanding the government investigate the collapse of their children’s school. As we started shooting, we met deputy mayor and police chief Chen of Deyang again. Very soon the three police officers we met three days ago came to us. There was a video photographer from the Police Department busy shooting our images. This time the police officers threatened to arrest us if we did not leave or if we returned to his territory again.

In the coming three days, we travelled to other cities in guerrilla-war style for our investigations. We met police officers and special commando officers; some took pictures of us with suspicious and hateful stares, but did not go further. On two occasions, the police officers either blocked our camera lens or drove us off the school ground. Then on 1 June, International Children’s Day, we were informed by the parents who were in touch with us that they would have a memorial service on the site of Fuxin Primary School. In the early morning, our two SUVs approached the township and we saw dozens of police officers were positioning themselves to surround the school and to block the entry ways. Being aware of the arrest warning, our team decided to give up our shooting plan and left the site. A local reporter with press credentials was working with our Chinese co-producer. From their footage, I saw the three officers we met were on the site and a police photographer was filming as thoroughly as
possible. In the late afternoon, as the Chinese reporter and our co-producer were returning to the provincial capital, the local police chased them all the way to our hotel. That evening as our team was shopping in a supermarket to prepare for our departure the next day, we were surrounded by more than a dozen of police cars from both the Deyang Police Bureau as well as the Sichuan Provincial Police Bureau for Entry and Exit of Foreigners. All of us, including our Chinese co-producer, were taken to the Headquarters of the Provincial Police Bureau for questioning. After eight hours of questioning, we were all warned to leave China immediately, except that I was allowed to have some extra days to spend with my mother in the city.

My friends and classmates working for the government revealed to me that before 1 June, a new directive had been issued from the central government to tighten control over the media, especially the foreign press. The major factor prompting this quick change could be attributed to the changing tone of the mass media from sympathetic and cooperative to inquisitive, reflective and muckraking. On the one hand, the parents of killed students started their petitions and protests in local government sites or had gone to Beijing. Starting from 20 May, hundreds of parents protested in front of their municipal governments or court houses in Beichuan, Dujiangyan and Mianzhu and dozens of them successfully broke through the bans from the local government and reached Beijing to petition for an investigation of collapsed school buildings, an adequate insurance and compensation for the parents and punishments for corrupt officials and contractors who were responsible for unsafe school buildings.23

On the other hand, the domestic media started discussing the state failures in building and maintaining schools, in rescuing in a timely manner and in responding to people's petitions. On 19 May at a "Dedication of Love Evening" (爱的奉献晚会), broadcast live, Tie Ning, chairwoman of China's Writers' Association, emphasized that the enormous rescue work symbolized the important growth of and contribution from the "civil society." The attending propaganda czar of the Party, Li Changchun, reportedly dismayed and dismissed these remarks as wrong-placed compliments because they eclipsed the omnipotent role of the Party and the state.24

The liberal newspaper Southern Weekend based in Guangzhou published sharp and critical commentaries in their special issues (22 and 29 May, respectively) on some problems exposed by the quake, especially raising the question about the quality of school houses.25 In Sichuan, there were four valiant musketeers, Huang Qi, Tan Zuoren, Liao Yiwu and Ran Yunfei, who used pen as sword in this crusade. Outside Sichuan, artist Ai Weiwei in Beijing and Ai Xiaoming, a professor in Guangzhou, organized volunteers to start their investigations and used video cameras to record and expose horrifying findings. Some writers and commentators criticized the incompetence of people's deputies in legislatures, proposed to erect a "wailing wall" for the victims, urged the government to establish a "management system for disasters," called for future construction to meet quality standards and called on a spiritual reconstruction out of moral failures, etc.26

The government had noticed that some foreign media (the official media targeted the German weekly Spiegel and the overseas Falun Gong media) had increasingly questioned the Chinese government for turning the disaster into a PR blitz as well as concealing some problems.27 Just a week before, the Chinese government had been happy to see that "China has won respect and praise from the entire world"; now, however, it saw a growing conspiracy to provoke the Chinese against their government, damage the image of the Party and destabilize China. It has become a pattern that positive coverage of China from the international media is shown to the domestic audience as confirmation and admiration of the Chinese government's great achievements, while any negative or critical coverage is quickly labelled as an "evil-spirited conspiracy" against China. The Central Party Propaganda Department sent directives to local governments to restrict reports on the widespread collapse of school buildings.28 The authorities at all levels started to harass foreign reporters, drive them out of the school sites, smash their equipment, close down dissenting internet sites and arrest dissidents (such as Huang Qi who was sentenced to five-year jail term).29 The local governments also warned the parents not to do interviews with foreign media and threatened to arrest them if they did so.

The propaganda departments from the centre to the localities actively promoted the leitmotif of patriotism, nationalism, positive images of the leaders, great sacrifices of the military and admirable achievements by the governments at all levels. Overall, the media had to serve the call from Premier Wen: "Much distress helps regenerate a nation" ("Trials help resurrect a nation—duowan xingbang").
On 5 June, Yu Qiyu, a noted writer based in Shanghai, published on his blog, "A Tearful Appeal to the Petitioning Victims in Earthquake," in which he mentioned the interrogation of our team by the police ("five reporters from foreign country") and warned the parents: "Some people with malicious intention against China are wishfully waiting for something to go wrong." He further said: "Several internationally renowned seismologists have said that theoretically speaking all houses would collapse in a quake with the Richter scale 7.8 and above." He also said:

A Buddhist master has told me, with the blessings from more than one billion people all the past survivors would have become bodhisattvas, who would give further blessings to China. If your children have souls in the heaven, they must have been in peace now.30

On 6 June, Wang Zhaoshan, Vice Chairman of Shandong Writers Association, published a poem, entitled "Personal Statement from Beneath the Ruins," which read:

Natural Disaster is inevitable
Death does not deserve too much talk
Hearing calls from the president, cries from the premier
Being grieved by the Party, loved by the state,
Having one billion people shed tears in group,
Even though I have become a ghost,
What happiness I have!
Silver airplanes and armored vehicles rushed to save us youngsters,
Being assisted by Uncle Soldier at the left and Auntie Police Officer at the right,
With the grand love of a nation, I find it satisfactory to experience death.
I would hold only one wish in my heart: a TV set in front of my grave.
To watch the Olympiad and join in the celebration!

The temporary "thawing" in media control ultimately ended up falling into a trite formula, namely a "ten-step flow chart of disaster management with Chinese characteristics" as summarized by a news weekly based in Hong Kong: (a) order to ban reports on incidents or disasters; (b) focus on positive and encouraging aspects; (c) clean up the site in a mysterious and speedy way; (d) entice victims to sign compensation agreements as soon as possible; (e) report highly affirmative reactions from the masses; (f) hold rally to celebrate great achievements; (g) commend heroes and model workers/peasants/soldiers; (h) shift responsibility to the lowest level or the least important person; (i) hire writers to give lavish praise; (j) organize reporters to revisit the disaster zone and report about achievements in recovery during the first Spring Festival after the disaster.31

In March 2009 at the National People's Congress gathering in Beijing, the vice-governor Wei Hong on behalf of the Sichuan provincial government categorically denied that the school collapses were both natural and man-made and insisted that considering the level of destruction in the quake, school buildings were destroyed by the sole factor of natural force. For that reason, no further investigation was warranted and no legal procedure was allowed for petitioners.33 However, this conclusion was impossible for the parents to accept. In the winter of 2010-2011, I conducted a telephone questionnaire survey among the parents who lost their children. 272 answered the phone call and 239 responded to the questions. I asked them the following question: "With regard to the death of your child in the collapsed school building, what caused it?" 215 parents gave valid answers; 23 did not answer the question. 15 chose the answer (a) that "It's a pure natural disaster," 97 chose (b) that "It's partially a natural disaster, partially caused by human failure (factor)," 101 chose (c) that "The corrupt local officials and contractors are to blame." One respondent chose both (b) and (c). One chose (d) "I have no idea." In another question: "Some parents have complained and some media have reported that the collapsed school buildings were shoddy "Tofu projects'. Do you agree?" 26 did not give an answer. 213 gave a valid answer. Among 213, 37 (17.37%) chose (a) "Basically agree," 153 (71.83%) chose (b) "Completely agree," 22 (10.33%) chose (c) "Not agree." Understandably, given the huge discrepancy between the official verdict and the opinions of parents, tensions and conflicts between the government and parents are inevitable.

Consequently, a widespread crackdown was implemented upon the parents and the dissenting voices from the outside. For example, Tan Zuoren was arrested in the same month after the National People's Congresses meeting and later sentenced to five years in jail; Ai Weiwei's blog was closed down one year after the Sichuan Earthquake and later he was beaten up and detained while he was in Sichuan to show his support to Tan. Huang Qi was sentenced to three years in jail later in the year. Several documentaries, including Our Children by
Analytical and Concluding Remarks

What is the essence of my one-week experience in the Sichuan earthquake zone? How will my observation help us understand an exceptional, short-lived outburst of Chinese media which was characterized by unprecedented activism and candor? Why did the Chinese Party-state abruptly change its view of the media as a helmsman to one of the state's main actors with regard to the Sichuan earthquake? My explanations to these questions are built upon one crucial variable: the oscillating role of the media in an asymmetric power relationship between the Party-state, the local governments, and ordinary Chinese people.

Chen Jibing, an editorial writer for a Shanghai newspaper, offered this observation:

"News media are the mouthpiece of the Party and the people." This principle is the keystone for both the theory and practice of Chinese socialist journalism. But in the hands of some wicked officials, it degenerates first to read as "News media are the mouthpiece of the Party committee and government at one specific level" and finally "News media are the mouthpiece of the leader first in command." It is not the worst that some local officials regard news media as a tool for glorifying their own achievements and flattering themselves. Worse than turning news media into "trumpeter and drummer" for advertising themselves, some local officials turn them into "smoke bomb" to attack people with dissenting voices, confuse people and twist facts, mislead people under their jurisdiction and the superior officials.

This author believes, in today's China with pluralistic interests, the Center and the ordinary people have their interests most compatible, for both take the stable governance in the long run as their core concern. But in this sociopolitical matrix, the Center stays atop, the populace the lowest bottom, in between lie many levels of local and industrial powers. News media are the nexus between the Center and the populace and turn the two into a unity to counterbalance the interest groups in the middle. Excessive control over mass media not only impairs the Center from hearing the populace, but also weakens the central authority at local levels.

In this three-tier game of power, a pluralist media that consist of the central, local and foreign could align with or alienate the actors in this asymmetric power structure. Under normal circumstances, the Party and government at all levels can be concealed into the state, and the state-populace relationship is that between a controller and an obedient population. The media tend to have less freedom and serve as the mouthpiece of the Party-state for political control. But under the circumstances of calamity, the antagonism between the Party-state and populace gives way to an"organized dependency", and a patron-client relationship emerges, in which the Party-state behaves as savior of a people who are in distress and despair. The Chinese phrase that characterized the 2008 earthquake is "combating the earthquake and going in for relief work," which denotes that natural calamity confronts all human beings and is like an invading army. A common enemy unifies the people with the Party-state, especially the Centre that controls disproportionately more resources than the local governments, and this compatibility provides a rare opportunity for the mass media to report disasters more aggressively. The 2008 Sichuan Earthquake is a case in point, just as any dispute with a foreign country can generate this unifying patriotism and nationalism.

With regard to the Sichuan earthquake, the Chinese government and its media control cartel (especially the propaganda departments and the police) diverged from their classic script at the very beginning as the media was converging with the state at the fundamental level of saving life. But as soon as the rescue and relief are over, news media often turn to issues of "summing up experiences and learning lessons." Responsibility has to be located somewhere, blame placed on
somebody. The state quickly relapsed into its traditional mode to reassert its grip upon the media once the latter started to dig out deep-seated problems. These included the collapse of school buildings that pointed to the pervasive corruption and negligence of government officials. Media also began to question the motives of the official propaganda campaign to raise a holy trinity of the Party-State-Army out of the ruins. At this moment, local new media often retreat to the traditional role of "trumpeter and drummer."

If the final responsibility for calamity can be localized, the Centre would lend support to the news media to work as a helpmate to supervise the local authorities. This explains why the central media were very aggressive in reporting the confrontations between the local government officials and the protesters in the quake and why the local governments wanted to keep the central media away. However, more and more evidence was exposed to point at a pervasive pattern of school collapses: official corruption, insufficient funding or misallocation of funds for school, and failure to abide by the building laws and regulations. Then, the attention paid to jerry-built schools ultimately amounted to an indictment of the entire state and its policy. The Centre realized that news media had to be reined in and the discussion on school collapse to be stopped. At this juncture, the only media that would keep muckraking were from foreign countries. Thus, the angry and frustrated parents turned to foreign media for help.

As political scientist E. E. Schattschneider points out, "[T] he outcome of every conflict is determined by the extent to which the audience becomes involved in it" and "the outcome of all conflict is determined by the scope of its contagion" (Italic original). The "audience" or the "spectators" are an integral part of conflict. Often, "it is the loser who calls in outside help." As the weak party has incentive to socialize the conflict to involve more spectators and participants, the strong often try to resort to privatization to control the scope of conflict.59

From the very beginning, the parents held their grudge against the school authority and local officials at the township or county level. However, the scope of crisis and its high-profiled publicity made it impossible for the local officials to find resources and courage to solve the conflicts at the local level. The parents were aware of the presence of the top leaders and mass media in the quake zone, so they had strong incentive to appeal to the higher authority and the media to put pressure upon the local officials. The parents we interviewed organized their protests and road-blockades because they had information that either the Premier or a Politburo Standing Committee member would inspect the area. By creating newsworthy events, the parents further opened up a new arena to contest the official discourse over the school collapse. In addition, news media were not a mere "arena." In Chinese political conflicts, often shrouded in an opaque decision-making process that gives the authorities unrestricted discretion in exercising power and coercion, the presence of new media introduces the possibility for multifaceted roles: a bystander, a recorder, a witness and even an important participant and an active player. The "neutrality" of such media is an antidote to the asymmetric power relationship that privileges the officials. As William A. Gamson points out, "A mass media-directed framing strategy provides the central mechanism for affecting scope. A full-fledged symbolic strategy aims not only at increasing the mobilizing potential among bystanders but also at increasing the readiness of one's primary constituency to act collectively and thereby neutralizing the framing efforts of one's adversaries."60 In our case, the protesters' "adversaries" are often the state or its surrogates.

But by creating the "contagion of conflict," the parents ran a high risk of alienating the central leadership once they believed the protests could spill over to other issues and regions and destabilize the entire regime. The parents attempted many times to go to the provincial capital and Beijing to petition, and they were either intercepted at the train stations or caught and forced back home by the local police officers who chased after them to Beijing. The court system was instructed by the Centre not to accept any lawsuit concerning school collapse. After all channels for their grievances were blocked, the unofficial media and foreign media became the only available allies and continued the coverage. In the winter of 2010–2011, I conducted the telephone survey among the parents who lost their children that I referred to earlier. I asked: "Do you want the outside world (including the foreign countries) to continue to pay attention to the investigation and punishment of those implicated in the collapsed school buildings?" One hundred and eighty-seven
Table 14.1: Interest, actors, political alignment and the role of media: The case of Sichuan earthquake

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State-Media Relationship</th>
<th>Official Media (Central)</th>
<th>Official Media (Local)</th>
<th>Unofficial Media</th>
<th>Foreign Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage I: Unanimous Moment (12-19 May, The primary interests of the Centre, local state and the people coincide)</td>
<td>Active, spontaneous participant with more professional autonomy.</td>
<td>Active, spontaneous participant with more professional autonomy.</td>
<td>Active, spontaneous participant with less fear and critical edge.</td>
<td>Aggressive coverage with some scepticism but less harsh criticisms. Access is granted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage II: Triangular Moment (20-31 May, local government and the people diverge on key interests, the Centre does not take a clear stand and reserves the leeway to intervene more as a final arbiter)</td>
<td>Seek an active helpful role to the Centre and at the same time try to assume more the role of social conscience on behalf of the ordinary people.</td>
<td>Tend to exercise self-censorship and keep low-profile in reporting. They become bolder only when they report on other local governments beyond their own home region.</td>
<td>As the participants would dwindle as some take precaution, the remaining (mainly on the internet) would become more critical and with increasing intensity.</td>
<td>Aggressive coverage with heightened scepticism and sharper criticism of government officials. The sympathy given to the weak increases. Access is restricted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage III: Bipolar Moment (1 June and thereafter, The Centre and local state join together to defend their converged interest, emerges a dichotomy of the state vs people)</td>
<td>Exercise self-censorship or completely disappear from the controversial issue.</td>
<td>Keep silent and treat the contentious issues as taboo.</td>
<td>Only a few dissenters would continue their crusade against the state on behalf of the victims.</td>
<td>Energized zeal and interest to create a muckraking campaign and focus more on exposé with some kind of news sensationalism. Access is denied.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Graph made by the author.
Notes


6. Zhang, He Qinglian.


19. Chen and Shi Ying, p. 115.


24. This was relayed to me by a well-informed friend in China and Li's unhappiness was corroborated by the deletion of Tie Ning’s remarks in the later issued DVD by CCTV and China International TV Corporation in 2008.


33. To find out more detailed about how the Chinese government orchestrated a campaign to scuttle its efforts to win an Oscar, see: Ming Xia, pp. 114-131.