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INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

The Political Logic of Media Control in China

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China has two separate types of media—public and internal—with different content that is aimed at two distinct audiences. Public media include print media (books and periodicals), broadcast media (film, radio, and television), and digital media (Internet and mobile media). Internal media occasionally feature books and documentaries, but consist primarily of limited-circulation periodicals that carry analytical and news reports. In contrast to the public media, whose content is openly available, internal media circulate only to regime insiders, usually those holding various types of leadership positions. The rapidly burgeoning scholarship on the Chinese media has focused on the public media and has produced two closely related central insights about the political logic of media control: one is that censorship is more likely to affect content that can lead to collective action,¹ and the other is that critical reporting that does not lead to collective action will be encouraged in order to alleviate information shortages.² What deserves further scrutiny is the calculus that determines whether particular events have a collective action potential (and thus information about them should be censored) and what types of critical reporting can be allowed. To address this question, we need to examine the content and functions of the internal media in China. Analysis reveals that internal media content guides decisions about what information should be censored and what types of investigative reporting are permissible. Existing studies of the internal reporting system have not engaged with the issue of how the internal media can be used to shape the content of public media in China.³

This essay argues that the central function of the internal media in contemporary China is to provide time-sensitive information to the regime about popular discontent. The knowledge that is generated through the internal media system is then used to determine which events have collective action potential and should be subject to news censorship. The internal media also allow the power-holders to decide when information about such

events should be released to the public in the form of investigative reports. Though infrequent, the strategic publication of such reports allows the authorities to present an image of responsiveness to popular concerns and to portray the media not as simple mouthpieces of the party but as organs of public opinion supervision.⁴

This essay, which also serves as an introduction to this special issue of *Problems of Post-Communism* on Chinese media, is organized as follows. The first section analyzes the functions of the internal media in China. The next clarifies how a focus on internal media allows us to see both censorship and investigative reporting in the public media in a new light. Finally, we discuss the six essays that are included in this special issue and highlight the contributions that each of them makes to our understanding of media control in China.

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE INTERNAL MEDIA IN CHINA

The internal media (内参 *neican*) system in China dates back to 1931, when the Red China News Agency (the precursor to the Xinhua News Agency) started publishing classified daily bulletins for the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, which was then operating out of the Ruijin Soviet in Jiangxi Province. The first bulletin appeared on November 12, 1931, under the title *Cankao xiaoxi* (参考消息 Reference News), and covered both international and domestic news.⁵ Other classified Xinhua bulletins were created in the years leading up to the 1949 revolution, the most important being *Neibu cankao* (内部参考 Internal Reference), which began publication on September 22, 1949, as a *jimi* (机密 secret) serial with a circulation that was limited to members of the Central Committee and provincial party committees.⁶ By 1950, a division of responsibility had been established: *Cankao xiaoxi* focused on foreign news, and *Neibu cankao* covered domestic events, with a special emphasis on hostile reactions and comments (敌对性的反应和评论 *diduixingde fanying he pinglun*). This arrangement established the backbone of the internal information-gathering system. To this day,

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internal reporting is divided into separate international and domestic news streams.⁷

During the decades since 1949, the internal media system has increased in size and complexity. Some of the changes have involved expanding the range of the internal circulation materials beyond periodical bulletins to include sensitive books and documentaries.⁸ Others have resulted from the growth in the ranks of news outlets producing internal bulletins beyond the Xinhua News Agency: today, all major periodicals as well as all television and radio stations prepare classified internal news bulletins. After 1949, the need to generate bulletins with various levels of classification (some circulating only to Politburo Standing Committee members and others having a considerably larger list of recipients) gradually led to a multiplication of the number of bulletins that were printed. Surprisingly, some classified bulletins were demoted in status to public media (for example, *Cankao xiaoxi* radically expanded its circle of recipients in 1957 and eventually became a newspaper that is readily available both on a subscription basis and through newspaper kiosks),⁹ while new classified periodicals emerged to take their place. Although some scholars have argued that the rise of investigative journalism in the commercial media since the 1980s has made the internal media obsolete,¹⁰ there is no sign that these media have disappeared. On the contrary, the number of internal publications has significantly expanded to accommodate the special challenges to the monitoring of public opinion that were presented by the rise of commercialized media in the 1980s, the Internet in the 1990s and 2000s, and social media in the 2010s.¹¹

From the point of view of the consumers of internal media, their main advantage over the public media is the content that they are required to produce. As a general rule, all internal media carry negative news, but the most sensitive material is published in bulletins with the highest levels of classification and the most restricted circulation. A 1953 Central Committee instruction issued to the Xinhua journalists writing for *Neibu cankao* gives us a sense of the type of coverage leaders expected from the internal media during the initial years of communist governance.¹² The journalists were generally instructed to collect information on important events not suitable for open media reporting and to provide objective, factual reporting. Specifically, this included reporting on the political attitudes of the population and the opinions of various social strata about important domestic and international events. In addition, *Neibu cankao* contributors were expected to track the opinions of people from various strata about life and work problems as well as to monitor their views about the leading party and government organs. Finally, the bulletin had to cover natural disasters and counterrevolutionary activities.¹³ In sum, *Neibu cankao* was entrusted with a very broad mandate of reporting on negative news.

We are in the fortunate position of being able to assess to what extent *Neibu cankao* followed its mandate to transmit information about negative news to the party elite. Because

they are classified, only occasional issues of this bulletin have previously become available to scholars.¹⁴ The lack of systematic access to this source has impeded scholarly research on its role in the Chinese media system. This essay relies on a veritable treasure trove that is available at an archival repository in Greater China: namely, all 3,612 issues of *Neibu cankao* that were published between the inception of the bulletin in September 1949 and December 1964. A detailed coding and analysis of the content of these materials reveals that the top leadership was apprised of a number of negative phenomena, such as episodes of hunger; shortages of goods; and the incidence of corruption, theft, and waste. It is also noteworthy that there were reports of ethnic and religious minority unrest. In addition, *Neibu cankao* tracked various anti-regime and enemy activities, such as the creation of counterrevolutionary organizations or the infiltration of different parts of China by foreign spies. Most frequent were reports on popular reactions, opinions, and views, which also occasionally included dispatches on superstitions and widespread rumors.¹⁵ A specific breakdown of various sensitive news items appearing in *Neibu cankao* is provided in Table 1. We should note that coverage of negative news continued even during the Great Leap Forward, though at considerably lower frequencies than during other portions of the 1949–1964 period.

It is unrealistic to expect that we could have a baseline, which would allow us to determine whether this coverage is high or low. What we can do is compare the coverage of sensitive news items in the internal and the open press. Table 2 presents the frequency with which certain sensitive news appears in the titles of articles in *Neibu cankao* and in *People's Daily* between September 1949 and December 1964. If the internal and the open press were identical, we would expect the frequency of coverage of sensitive items to be the same. Because the total number of articles in *People's Daily* was 5.5 times greater than in *Neibu cankao* (275,000 articles vs. 50,000 articles), we can easily compute statistics for the expected coverage in the open press and then compare them to the actual coverage. The ratio of actual to expected coverage allows us to assess the extent to which the public media differ from the internal media. As we can see from Table 2, coverage of all sensitive news

TABLE 1.
Coverage of Some Sensitive News Items in *Neibu cankao*,
1949–1964.

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Number of reports</i>
Famine	75
Markets, quality, and supply of goods	961
Corruption, theft, and waste	440
Minorities and religion	325
Reactions, opinions, views, superstitions, and rumors	1,779
Enemies, spies, and enemy/anti-regime activity	1,666

Source: Author's calculations.

TABLE 2.
Coverage of Sensitive News Items in *Neibu cankao* and *People's Daily*, 1949–1964.

Issue	Neibu cankao	Actual People's Daily	Expected People's Daily	Ratio of actual to expected coverage
Famine	75	167	412	1:2.47
Black market	37	11	203	1:18.4
Counterrevolutionaries	148	314	814	1:2.6
Counterrevolutionary organizations	11	12	60	1:5
Reactions of the people	883	326	4,856	1:14.9

Source: Author's calculations.

items was significantly lower in the open press than it was in the internal press. Moreover, the content of the articles was also different. For example, articles on famine in *People's Daily* focused on successes in eliminating hunger, whereas those in the internal press identified the ongoing incidence of hunger in various parts of the country. Similarly, articles on counterrevolutionary activity in the open press celebrated the elimination of counterrevolutionaries, in contrast to *Neibu cankao* pieces that identified persistent problems in controlling counterrevolutionary activity. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, articles on reactions (反应 *fanying*) in the two outlets were extremely different in orientation: those in *People's Daily* overwhelmingly focused on the reactions of various government agencies to criticism expressed on the pages of the paper (thus projecting an image of government accountability to the population, not dissimilar from what Soviet papers did in the early 1950s),¹⁶ while *Neibu cankao* reported on critical reactions of the masses to various party initiatives. In sum, internal publications assessed popular views, whereas content in the public media was strategically deployed to guide popular opinion in ways that served the interests of the party.

The difference between the public and the internal media persists to the current day. Chinese journalists are encouraged to write information (信息 *xinxi*) for internal periodicals and news (新闻 *xinwen*) for the public outlets. A leaked directive from 2011 on writing reports for the party and the government sheds light on the different expectations involved in generating internal information and in producing public news stories.¹⁷ Information reports are supposed to help leaders reach decisions and need to be presented in an objective and clear writing style. By contrast, apart from entertaining the masses, news serves to propagandize, to educate, and to guide public opinion, and should therefore be presented in ornate language that uses metaphors and analogies. This document also specifies the kinds of information (on disasters, epidemics, and sudden incidents), whose casual release

to the public can impact social stability; such information can appear in the public media only with prior approval from the senior leader at the relevant level.¹⁸ Internal media therefore continue to serve as a repository for negative information; the role of the public media, as was recently emphasized by Xi Jinping, is to correctly guide public opinion (正确舆论导向 *zhengque yulun daoxiang*) by emphasizing positive publicity (正面宣传为主 *zhengmian xuanchuan weizhu*).¹⁹

Rather than being fossils of a bygone earlier chapter of communist governance, internal media have survived and thrived in the era of the Internet and social media, when the importance of the rapid collection and transmission of information on brewing popular discontent to regime insiders has increased exponentially. Chinese leaders receive a broad array of classified reports on popular opinion, including regular briefings on Internet public opinion.²⁰ This transfer of information notwithstanding, a stylized fact about communist regimes is that leaders ignore the reports they receive.²¹ One feature of the Chinese internal reporting system allows us to test this assumption: leaders have the option to ignore the information, to read it, or to read it and to issue instructions (批示 *pishi*). We have evidence that in 2005 central leading cadres (中央领导 *zhongyang lingdao*) issued instructions on 1,460 internal reference reports prepared by the Xinhua News Agency; by 2011, the number of reports receiving instructions by the top leadership had risen more than threefold to 4,557.²² This rapid increase attests both to the value that leaders attach to internal reporting and to the frequency with which these reports inform policy decisions; according to the internal rules of the Chinese bureaucracy, a report that has received a *pishi* automatically acquires the status of a policy document.²³

INTERNAL MEDIA AND THEORIES OF CENSORSHIP AND INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

The previous section established the ongoing relevance of internal media as a source of information on popular discontent for regime insiders in China. This section examines how taking into account the existence of internal media allows us to enrich current theories of censorship and investigative journalism.

Censorship is pervasive in China and applies to all media from books and periodicals to broadcast media and the Internet. For books, the primary method of preventing publication is by refusing to issue a publication permit; books that have been published without permission are targeted during the regular anti-pornography and anti-counterfeiting campaigns (扫黄打非行动 *saohuang dafei xingdong*).²⁴ For print media, low-tech physical removal of banned content is still practiced, especially for foreign newspapers and magazines, which may be sold with the banned article excised. This is not a practical method for Chinese

publications, which have significantly larger print runs and therefore necessitate more sophisticated pre-publication censorship and more severe post-publication sanctions that may involve the removal of transgressive editors-in-chief (like *Caijing's* Hu Shuli) and the temporary or permanent closure of the outlet (*Strategy and Management; Freezing Point*). For broadcast media, all Chinese radio and television stations are controlled by the state. Foreign broadcasts are either jammed (Radio Free Asia and Voice of America) or transmitted with a 12-second delay (CNN) that allows the censors to interrupt a program if sensitive content is being aired.²⁵ Finally, when it comes to the Internet and social media, a complex system of website blocking, keyword filtering, and content removal (especially for *weibo* and WeChat posts) helps ensure that offending material will not be available to Internet users.²⁶

How are decisions about censorship made? It is widely accepted that reporting topics are classified into three categories: those that cannot be covered (Tiananmen, Falun Gong, Taiwanese independence, Tibetan independence, the personal lives of top leaders, etc.), those whose coverage is encouraged (economic and social development, sports and cultural achievements, ethnic harmony, etc.), and those that fall into a gray zone, where coverage may sometimes be permitted.²⁷ Most recent research has focused on understanding the gray zone, especially with regard to Internet censorship, where the boundaries of what is permissible change often. We have two sets of findings. Based on research on social media posts from 2011, one article argues that posts with a collective action potential are more likely to be deleted from web sites than posts criticizing government policies.²⁸ Another piece, based on research with WeChat posts during the anti-rumor campaign in 2015, demonstrates that criticism of government policies like housing demolition and stability maintenance is censored, along with political terms like the death of the party (亡党 *wangdang*), freedom of the press, and freedom of speech.²⁹ Despite their different findings with regard to criticism of government policies, the two pieces reach similar conclusions about the type of content that is subject to censorship — namely, posts that can lead to destabilization, either by facilitating collective action (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013) or by spreading harmful rumors (Ng and Pan 2017). This is consistent with the insight from the Chinese-language scholarly literature that online public opinion is managed with the paramount goal of maintaining social stability.³⁰

What the existing literature has not established is how the government develops an algorithm for deciding whether content in the gray zone should be subject to censorship. Although some deletion of content is automatic, existing studies have documented a frequent time lag between the appearance of material in the gray zone and its censorship (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Ng and Pan 2017), suggesting that decisions about the removal of content are made in light of information about the collective action potential of

events that are being discussed on social media. Since we know that reports on rumors and on events with collective action potential are routinely prepared for the leadership,³¹ it is reasonable to assume that these reports inform decisions about existing content in the gray zone that needs to be expunged, prevented from appearing in the future through additions to the list of blocked keywords, or subject to posts by pro-government commentators who aim to distract the public.³²

A second line of research that can be extended by paying attention to the internal media is the scholarship on investigative journalism in China.³³ The basic facts are beyond dispute: investigative reporting has been rare (Bandurski and Hala 2010 document a mere eight cases in 1996–2003) and has become essentially extinct since 2008, although citizen journalism on social media has occasionally filled the investigative reporting niche in recent years. It is less clear why the government allows investigative reporting, either in print or on the Internet. There are no truly independent print media in China (even the most liberal commercial periodicals have a parent newspaper or company that is owned by the communist party or is affiliated with a state agency) and any Internet content can be removed by the two million censors that manage the web. This suggests that there is a strategic logic to allowing investigative reporting content to circulate in print or on the web. The only explanation that has been offered thus far argues that investigative reporting is not simply permitted but actively encouraged in order to reduce the information deficit of upper-level officials about malfeasance by lower-level cadres; the paper clarifies that the need of officials to obtain information through investigative reporting has to be balanced against their concern that investigative reporting can reveal that discontent is widespread and facilitate collective action against the regime.³⁴ The formal model therefore postulates that the regime will restrict the amount of investigative reporting it allows depending on the underlying social tensions. It is not clear how the regime will obtain information on what these social tensions are, especially if it restricts the very channel (investigative reporting) that is supposed to provide it with this information. The answer is the internal circulation media (which Lorentzen argues are becoming extinct).³⁵ But the very existence of the internal media (which are investigative by design) alongside other channels for the collection of information (the party, state security, and various state agencies) makes us wonder why the leadership would encourage investigative in the public media.³⁶

An alternative explanation that is suggested by this essay is that so-called “investigative reporting” is permitted not in order to obtain information but to fulfill other goals. The hypothesis that the publication of such reports may be subject to a hidden political logic is generated by the fact that in the highest-profile cases of investigative journalism (the Henan AIDS crisis, the Sun Zhigang incident, and the

Sanlu melamine scandal), the public media broke the stories many weeks and sometimes months after information about them first began to circulate.³⁷ In these cases, the publication of investigative reports allowed the central government to appear responsive to citizen concerns: the illegal blood collection centers in Henan that facilitated the spread of HIV were eliminated; the custody and repatriation system that led to the death of Sun Zhigang was abolished; and efforts were made to strengthen the notoriously lax food safety standards following the Sanlu scandal.³⁸ Materials on the internal media indicate that decision makers were promptly made aware of these problems through internal reports,³⁹ thus suggesting that “investigative reporting” was used by the regime in order to signal its resolve to address pressing concerns that were generating significant social discontent. In this way, the open press in contemporary China is similar to the Cuban press today, which also engages in carefully calibrated public opinion supervision.⁴⁰

The foregoing discussion allows us to address a general problem in the study of authoritarian regimes. These polities are nontransparent by design. This creates a hurdle for analysts studying sensitive issues like the political logic of media control. Empirically observable indicators, such as the appearance of investigative reports, are consistent with two very different theories. A theory based on the analysis of public media may postulate that these reports appear because the regime needs information. An alternative theory based on the internal reporting system would argue that the regime has abundant sources of information that are not publicly disseminated, thus making the publication of investigative reporting an act that is subject to a different logic that allows for other regime goals (such as appearing accountable) to be fulfilled. The problem of the observational equivalence of theories of authoritarian politics that are based on open sources as opposed to internal documents is not limited to the media; rather, it is a central concern for students of autocracy and should be explicitly acknowledged when developing theories of various political phenomena in authoritarian regimes.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON MEDIA CONTROL IN CHINA

This special issue of *Problems of Post-Communism* was conceived in order to shed some light on a puzzling outcome. After nearly four decades of substantial media marketization, China has skillfully avoided the politically destabilizing effects of *glasnost*-style media liberalization and has retained a highly restrictive media environment. In 2016, it was ranked 176th in the world in terms of press freedom; only Syria, Turkmenistan, North Korea, and Eritrea received lower scores.⁴¹ Even more surprising is the fact that China has over 700 million Internet users, yet the Internet has not lived up to its potential to serve as a

liberation technology.⁴² The answer to these puzzles lies in the skillful deployment of media censorship by the regime. The previous sections of this essay have argued that the internal media generate information on popular discontent that is used to determine the scope of this censorship and of permissible investigative reporting. The six articles that form the core of this special issue provide further details of various aspects of censorship.

Anne-Marie Brady’s article offers a magisterial overview of the continuities of media control from the early reform period to the current ideological tightening under Xi Jinping, who is vigorously using the media to avoid the belief crisis that in his view led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Maria Repnikova’s article engages with the related question of how China learned from media liberalization in the Soviet Union and promoted public opinion supervision as a much more regime-friendly concept than *glasnost*. Matthew D. Johnson focuses on another example of Chinese learning. He provides evidence that the regime, having drawn lessons from the Arab Spring, has coopted independent documentary filmmakers through a complex system of patronage that keeps foreign forces at arm’s length and through strategic ambiguity about the limits of what is permissible. The next two articles turn to the technical infrastructure that makes censorship possible. Jennifer Pan argues that China’s success in web censorship is explained by the lack of demand for U.S. social media platforms and the dominance of domestic firms in the market for Internet content. The following article by Daniela Stockmann and Ting Luo demonstrates that online public opinion rises more easily on social media like *Weibo* than on platforms like Baidu Tieba and WeChat because of differences in technological design with regard to interactivity. The final article, by Wen-Hsuan Tsai, turns the analytic lens outward to the external propaganda that is used by the party to influence foreign public opinion about China. This article makes clear that media control is not simply aimed at guiding domestic public opinion but rather strives to impact global perceptions of China. Taken as a whole, these articles greatly enhance our understanding of the ideological foundations and the technical infrastructure of media control in contemporary China.

What does the future hold for Chinese media? The current leadership has shown resolve to maintain firm party control over the media: Xi Jinping recently declared that “all media are surnamed party” (媒体姓党 *meiti xing dang*).⁴³ Although media liberalization (*glasnost*) was one of the key factors that contributed to the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, media reform in China has not undermined the regime. The party-state has relied on a combination of technological surveillance and human monitoring to ensure that the media do not disseminate offending content. The logic of this control is fundamentally determined by external and domestic political considerations. Externally, the regime has been

apprehensive about the infiltration of Western democratic ideas into the country. This concern was first articulated at the time of the campaign against bourgeois liberalization in the early 1980s, but became stronger during Tiananmen and especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since the early 1990s, China has vigilantly resisted the efforts of “hostile forces” (敌对势力 *didui shili*) to use the media to spread Western democratic ideas. The domestic political considerations have to do with the ability of critical media content to undermine the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and to facilitate collective action. The collapse of authoritarian regimes throughout the world over the last three decades has demonstrated to the Chinese leadership the paramount importance of maintaining regime legitimacy and stability. It looks like a safe bet that the current system will persist, provided that the regime can preserve the internal media and continue to readjust them to serve the goals of public media control in the digital age. The Chinese media, in contrast to their counterparts in the East European communist regimes, do not seem poised to act as agents of political liberalization.

NOTES

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- 6 *Ibid.*, 96; *Neibu cankao*, no. 2968 (February 1, 1960), 24.
- 7 Xinhua News Agency, 新华社年鉴 [Xinhua Yearbook] (Beijing: Xinhua News Agency, various years).
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- 10 Lorentzen, “China’s Strategic Censorship,” 412. More generally, on commercialized media see Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Xin Xin, *How the Market Is Changing China’s News: The Case of the Xinhua News Agency* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012); Susan L. Shirk, ed., *Changing Media, Changing China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).
- 11 See Xinhua News Agency, 新华社年鉴 [Xinhua Yearbook] (Beijing: Xinhua News Agency, various years).
- 12 中共中央关于新华社记者采写内部参考资料的规定 [Central Committee Regulation for Xinhua Journalists Writing Internal Reference Materials] (July 1953).
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- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 David Bandurski, “Under Xi, the Media Has Turned from a ‘Mouthpiece of the Masses’ to the Party’s Parrot,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, June 21, 2016, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/06/21/under-xi-the-media-has-turned-from-a-mouthpiece-of-masses-to-the-partys-parrot/>, accessed April 5, 2017.
- 20 For the types of Internet monitoring reports that the Xinhua News Agency has been preparing since the late 1990s, see Xinhua News Agency, 新华社年鉴1997–2011 [Xinhua Yearbook 1997–2011] (Beijing: Xinhua News Agency, 1997–2011). See also Wen-hsuan Tsai, “How ‘Networked Authoritarianism’ Was Operationalized in China: Methods and Procedures of Public Opinion Control,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 101 (2016): 731–44.
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- 24 Martin K. Dimitrov, *Piracy and the State: The Politics of Intellectual Property Rights in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp. 227–30.
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