

Book Review

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Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China.
By Daniela Stockmann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Daniela Stockmann has given us one of the most important books for understanding how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has maintained one-party rule while advancing market-oriented reform. *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* is not a book exclusively for China specialists but for political scientists in general, especially students of comparative authoritarianism and political communication. The book advances a strong theoretical argument for how the CCP has strengthened the authoritarian regime through media commercialization. Stockmann provides convincing empirical support for the argument using quantitative and qualitative methods, including experiments, statistical analyses, and field interviews.

An increasing number of studies investigate how authoritarian regimes remain resilient in the age of economic globalization. Since Deng Xiaoping turned the Chinese economy in the direction of marketization, the CCP's ability to maintain authoritarian rule has been a major puzzle in the study of Chinese politics. Media commercialization sounds like a harbinger of democratization. However, Stockmann argues, it has actually raised the credibility of both the new commercial media and the existing official media, made it easier for the CCP to control and govern information flow, and hence has strengthened the authoritarian regime. Thus, she contends that the introduction of market mechanisms to media does "not produce greater pluralism of political voices in media" (5) but instead "promotes media credibility across different forms of authoritarian rule" (14).

The book focuses on the institutions in charge of monitoring news content. In China, "media marketization took place within an institutional structure that allowed propaganda authorities to intervene in the organization, personnel decisions, and editorial process of newspapers" (66). The CCP

has two major institutions to monitor and regulate news content: the Propaganda Department (PD) and the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP). The PD and the GAPP effectively impose limits on the state's tolerance of media messages, and as a result the distance between official and nonofficial papers is kept close, even though the introduction of nonofficial papers allows the papers to engage in public discourse.

The book's empirical discussion is divided into two parts: news production and media credibility. In both parts, Stockmann focuses on two issue areas: labor law and the United States. Interestingly, she finds "similar patterns in news coverage on issues as different as labor law and the United States" (83). Overall, "the central government demands a positive spin on stories that may undermine the goals and policies of public officials by publishing too much criticism of American policies and too many negative news stories on labor protests and labor disputes" (44).

When producing news, Chinese media has to walk a tightrope, figuring out the boundaries for news reporting as well as the selection and tone of news stories. Along with media commercialization, the public's demand for high-quality media reporting has risen. Thus, when reporting the US news, Chinese news producers have to consider the interest of Chinese audiences and yet make sure that the report supports China's official position in foreign policy. As a result, although media practitioners do not think that the topic of the United States is sensitive, they usually omit discussion of criticism of Chinese policy by the United States (and other foreign) media.

In the meantime, when reporting labor law, nonofficial papers cover the sensitive issues that official papers will not cover, and hence the news content of the nonofficial newspapers differs from that of the official newspapers. However, Stockmann finds, "in the case of labor law, market demand and government policy converge; there is simply no need for the PD to restrict news reporting if media outlets are pulled in the desired direction by market forces" (111). As a result,

news content of the nonofficial newspapers supports government policy without explicitly using coercive press restrictions by the media regulatory institutions. Thus, Stockmann concludes that “market mechanisms only work in a way favorable to the government as long as the public demands information that converges with policy goals and as long as these demands are similar among readership groups” (130).

Studies of political communication have found that when consuming news, the public looks at the news through the labels they have given to the media. China is no exception, and the author’s experimental studies suggest that the media label had a strong effect on the persuasiveness of the news story (177). In China, Stockmann finds, the public regards official papers as propaganda organs but at the same time as “experts on the policies and goals of the government”; meanwhile, they regard nonofficial papers as “being more knowledgeable about ordinary people’s concerns” (168). Under this condition, “readers decide to read newspapers that they perceive to be closer to their own position and report about the news of the day in a way that they can relate to” (202), just as the public in a democracy would do when getting information through the media. However, in China’s authoritarian system, political messages in the news do not di-

verge, and hence the public needs to depend on the information sources available to them, which consist only of the reporting by official media. The introduction of nonofficial media has raised public demand for news information as nonofficial media has reported the news with which ordinary people are concerned. As a result, media liberalization has elevated the credibility of both nonofficial and official newspapers.

The argument that market liberalization of media has strengthened one-party rule by the CCP is provocative and in the end disheartening from a normative perspective. However, Stockmann’s research suggests that media commercialization may ultimately help the CCP to be more responsive to the public and to be committed to better governance. Compared with the Middle Eastern countries that experienced the “Arab Spring” in 2011, China’s authoritarian regime has more institutional tools to prevent such democratization movements. How well China’s authoritarianism can tolerate being responsive enough to the public and yet maintain one-party rule remains to be seen. Regardless, better institutionalized governance would make the transition to democracy smoother if such a transition were to take place. Viewed in this light, Stockmann’s findings are not disheartening but encouraging.