Book Review:

The Contentious Public Sphere: Law, Media, and Authoritarian Rule in China

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The Contentious Public Sphere: Law, Media, and Authoritarian Rule in China by Ya-Wen Lei, 2018, New Jersey, NY: Princeton University Press.

Drawing on in-depth interviews, newspaper articles, survey data, online texts, and official documents, Lei's new book analyzes the multi-stage institutional process of the emergence and persistence of a nationwide contentious public sphere in contemporary China. Despite increasingly intensified governmental containment, this unruly public sphere is capable of generating contentious issues and public agendas not set by the government, and such a sphere is recognized by the party-state as a potential force with which it must reckon and negotiate.

Since 1998, public opinion has been regularly produced and circulated under the strict control of the Chinese government. However, between 2005 and 2012, the continuing, drastic growth and unruliness of public opinion incidents indicated a shift "from a contained to a contentious public sphere" (p. 32). According to Lei, the rise of the contentious public sphere in this period is related to four major institutional processes: the economic reform initiated in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the political innovation in the late 1980s, the marketization of state-controlled media, and the introduction and popularization of the Internet. As Lei argues, "the rise of China's contentious public sphere was an intended consequence of the Chinese state's campaign of authoritarian modernization. … To do so, the state institutionalized the double-edged instruments of modern law, marketized media, and the Internet." (p. 3)

First, marketized newspapers brought about political liberalization through producing critical news reports and influencing their readers. Though the Chinese state adopts a "divide and rule" strategy to discourage collaboration across organizations and to prevent the formation of crosscutting social and political forces with uncanny precision, Lei shows that the interaction between journalists, especially advocacy journalists, and legal professionals developed a shared goal of cultivating civil society, and then utilized critical news reporting as an important means of achieving this goal. In Guangzhou, many collaborative networks were established to produce critical news reports and expose social issues that were deeply rooted in China's institutions and political system. In some cases, those reports even received government awards for providing legal aid and assisting vulnerable groups (p. 92).

Why would the Chinese government allow such collaboration and support the advancement of public interests during this period? Lei argues that the relationships between the local market and political environment of the media field are crucial for the production of critical news reporting. To examine this hypothesis, she selects three coastal region cities—Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou—to conduct a comparative study on how the media field is situated in relation to state agencies and the newspaper market.

According to Lei's analysis, Guangzhou had a much more competitive local newspaper market than Beijing and Shanghai. State agencies in Guangzhou and Beijing were more structurally fragmented than their counterparts in Shanghai because of the coexistence of multilevel party-state agencies. Such a porous political field allowed effective and strategic production of critical news. Usually journalists at the provincial newspapers avoided criticizing the central government, the communist

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regime, or the Guangdong provincial party-state. Instead, they targeted low-level governments in Guangdong, local agencies, or local governments outside Guangdong province with no authority over provincial newspapers in Guangdong. Legal professionals also assisted journalists with news topic selection, investigation, and analyses. These various forms of alliance greatly aided critical news reporting. As a result, the practices of Guangzhou newspapers earned the respect of readers and journalist communities across the whole nation and were often emulated by newspapers in other localities. Beijing and Shanghai followed different patterns. In Beijing, the media field was positioned in tandem with less unified state agencies and a less competitive newspaper market. In Shanghai, the media field was situated alongside a more unified state apparatus and a less competitive newspaper market.

Second, with the rise of Internet sector, online public opinion leaders gradually played a crucial role in mobilizing Internet users and producing public opinion incidents with liberal and critical voices. With the rise of Weibo in 2009 and before the "purge the Internet" campaign in August 2013, public opinion leaders actively discussed public affairs and disseminated liberal discourse and criticism about social and political problems to the netizens with great influence. Typical public issues discussed online included state censorship, government accountability, corruption, environmental protection, and protection of vulnerable groups. Lei finds that in January 2015, 58 percent of the top one hundred Weibo opinion leaders were political liberals, while only 15 percent of these leaders were political conservatives (p. 124). The result was a paradoxical state response during this period: on the one hand, the state considered public opinion as an unruly force, capable of generating potential threatening contentions; on the other hand, the spread of public opinion was so fast and influential, that the central state could no longer afford to simply comprehend it but had to engage with it.

However, the last couple years have witnessed severe political control and crackdowns on China's contentious public sphere under President Xi's leadership. Compared with the Hu-Wen leadership, the Xi administration considers the rise of the public sphere not only a risk to social stability, but more importantly, a serious threat to "national security, the continued existence of the CCP, and the unity of the Chinese nation" (p. 173). As a result, the consolidated Chinese state has significantly upgraded its techniques of surveillance and censorship to contain online expression, silent critical online voices, restrict Internet news production, and attack social networks connecting public opinion leaders, rights defense lawyers, journalists, NGOs, and activists (p. 184).

Theoretically, this book sheds new light on theories of the public sphere and its relationship with authoritarian rule, law, and the media. However, the empirical findings of this research are already outdated. In retrospect, the book only presents readers with the process of the emergence of the contentious public sphere in China in the contemporary history. In the beginning of the book, Lei asks, "How durable is China's emergent and contested public sphere?" (p. 5) The answer to this question is now very clear. When the party-state extensively consolidates its power under the Xi administration, the development of China's contentious public sphere has been almost suppressed—it is not "a moderate decline in the expression" (p. 33) but a complete disappearance. Moreover, this book ignores many recent studies on how the Chinese government tactically employs internet commenters to manipulate online opinion by posting and retweeting comments favorable to the party-state, for example, Rongbin Han's study on China's online fifty-cent army and Gary King and his team's research on local government's online censorship strategies. After all, social media is not necessarily a force for democratization, but a neutral one which can also be exploited by authoritarian regimes to their advantage.

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