

via a traditional coercive or repressive lens, nor that of conflict or war. China's alternative emerging knowledge accumulation and network-building approach within the Global South may, that is, ultimately and differently forge international power too. This work hopefully serves also to inspire onward scholarship that helps us to understand that prospect and its dimensions too.

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*Convenient Criticism: Local Media and Governance in Urban China*

DAN CHEN

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Dan Chen's nuanced and well-written book, *Convenient Criticism: Local Media and Governance in Urban China*, brings new insights to the burgeoning field of Chinese media studies. Chen discusses how journalists navigate local government media restrictions and opportunities, and how local government leaders, in turn, can use the media to their advantage. The topic is not new, but Chen brings fresh insight into the large but arguably stagnating pool of China media studies in at least three ways.

First, the book concentrates almost exclusively on TV journalism and lifestyle programming. Others have written about TV journalism before and some have touched on lifestyle programming too (e.g. Ruoyun Bai or Wanning Sun), but such work has been uncommon. In general, it is much easier to perform content analysis and to parse quantitative data for print media sources, and the field has mostly stuck with print (whether in newspapers or online). Rarer still is what Dan Chen has written: a mixed-methods book examining both the content and production of local television shows, using interview and quantitative data. Television is still the information medium of choice for a majority of China's citizens, and Chen is one of the few to tackle this subject head on.

Second, the book concentrates firmly on local media politics. Unlike most other work in the field, Chen does not focus exclusively on journalists. Instead, she delves into the complex relationship between journalists and local political actors, who each use the other to get ahead. Based on rich interview data and an impressive content analysis, *Convenient Criticism* argues that local Party officials sometimes (carefully) promote criticism of street-level officials and at other times suppress such coverage. Calling the former type "orchestrated criticism," Chen notes that unlike critiques initiated by media workers themselves ("organic criticism"), such "orchestrated" efforts are deliberately fostered by local state actors for political gain. Other analysts have examined why the *central* government permits critical coverage (e.g. Peter Lorentzen), but Chen is correct to note that "why local governments allow local media to scrutinize themselves remains a puzzle," and that "the variations in the level of critical reporting remains underexplored" (p. 25). The book's explanation for such a puzzle is compelling: local leaders at the beginnings of their tenure or those approaching a critical career stage are more likely to use orchestrated criticism to prove their governing talents, but as their tenure in office lengthens the incentives to criticize Party/state malfeasance diminish.

And third, Chen brings both evidence and nuance to bear on the debates about whether media reports about official malfeasance increase or reduce political stability. The answer, the book suggests, is a bit of both. Orchestrated criticism promoted by local powerholders is highly circumscribed and can only tackle small-scale local problems, but this “scaled-down narrative of critical reporting actually enables speedy resolution” (p. 33). Illegal construction, excessive traffic fines, or officials who shirk their duties are problems across China, and TV journalism can help ambitious leaders tackle particularly problematic local examples. At least temporarily, everyone but the malfactor can win: victims obtain redress, TV stations improve their ratings, and ambitious local leaders appear clean and decisive to citizens and bosses. But these local solutions are band-aids to many national problems “that can only be truly resolved with policy and institutional changes, which are beyond the reach of television news reports” (p. 33). In prioritizing the resolution of small-scale problems, *Convenient Criticism* suggests, the media/government nexus might prevent needed systemic changes. “Plagued by mistreatment and oppression,” Chen writes, “citizens gain a false sense of empowerment when their grievances are affirmed and the purported perpetrator, is identified, criticized and rectified” (p. 58). But this “made-up display of power” (p. 58) ultimately may let larger-scale social problems fester.

Despite these impressive accomplishments, the book is not flawless. Chen emphasizes the importance of local Party leaders’ individual personality and risk tolerance for shaping the media environment, but the way she operationalizes and measures personality differences is rather dicey. Because “it is virtually impossible to survey or interview local party secretaries in China,” she infers risk tolerance and media engagement from the frequency “a local leader’s name is mentioned in the local party newspaper. ... The higher the frequency, the more media-embrave the leadership style is” (p. 135). While I fully appreciate the difficulties in accurately surveying the personality differences of local Chinese Party officials, this approach is problematic for several reasons. First, it assumes that “local leaders have full control” (p. 135) over local Party newspapers, which is not always the case. Second, it ignores differences between local media cultures. TV journalists in more open Guangzhou, for example, may mention local Party bosses more frequently than those in Shanghai, even when the leaders of both places have the same level of media risk tolerance. And third, it elides the importance of exogenous local events that may impact media coverage. Natural disasters, celebrations, or even unexpected praise from central leaders may all involuntarily raise even the most media-shy local leader’s profile. In such cases, increased local TV coverage might not reflect personality differences but the force of events. A good deal – though not all – of the quantitative media analysis in *Convenient Criticism* rests on the slender reed of the assumption that “if a local leader’s name appears more frequently than other local leaders, then we can reasonably infer that this leader is more embrave of the media” (p. 135).

On the whole, however, *Convenient Criticism* is an admirable book that should be required reading for any serious analyst of the Chinese media. Based on excellent interview and survey data and backed up by an impressive content analysis of thousands of local TV news programmes, Dan Chen has written a highly readable, entertaining view of the complex relationship between local TV and local government. Her empirical and theoretical advances are undeniable, and the book is sure to make its mark on the field of Chinese media studies.

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