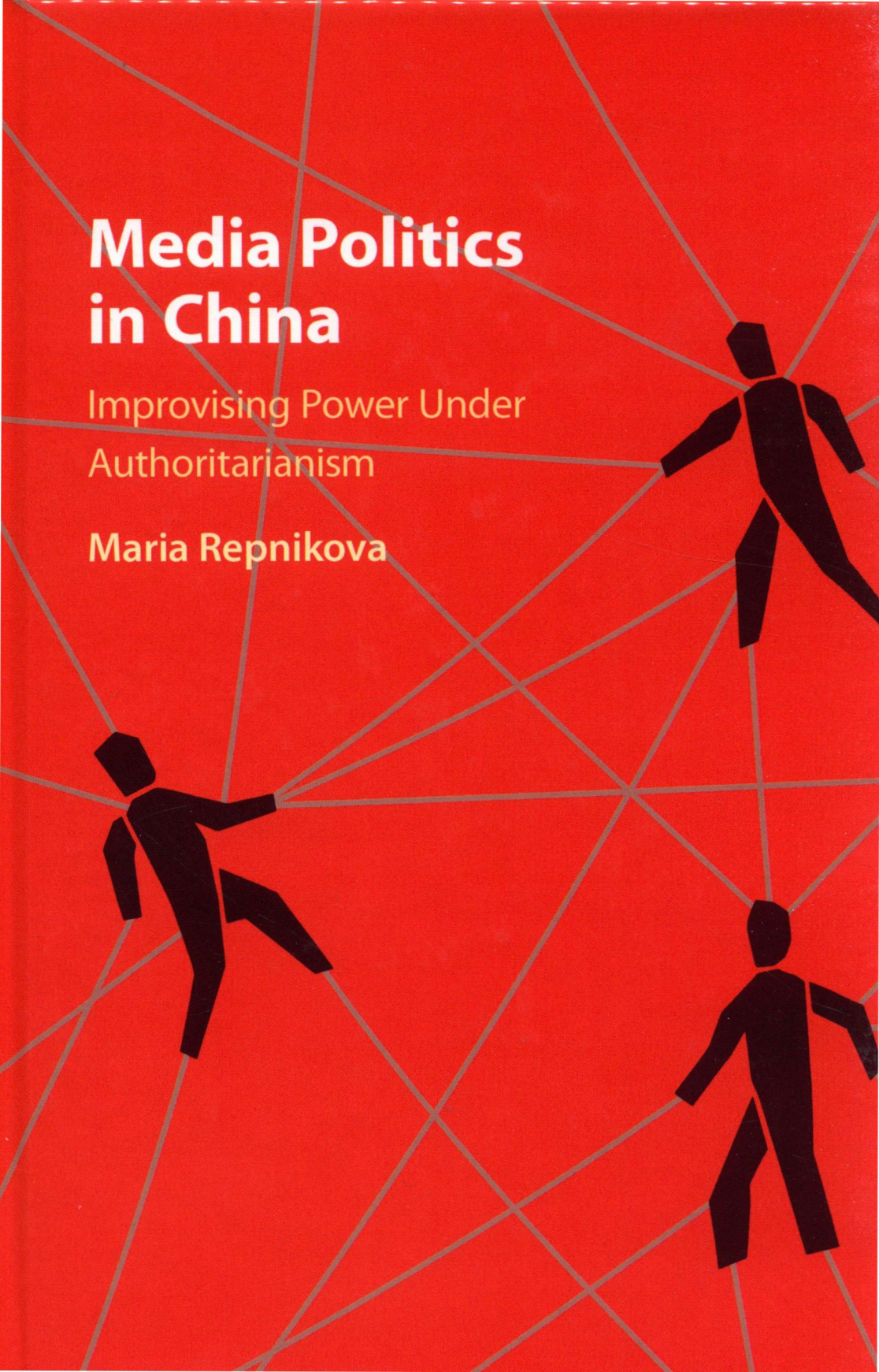


# Media Politics in China

Improvising Power Under  
Authoritarianism

Maria Repnikova





Maria Repnikova introduces the webs of Chinese media politics that are hidden beneath the imagery of overarching contention between the omnipowerful state and suppressed dissidents. Drawing on rich empirical data, this novel analysis demonstrates that the relationship between China's critical journalists and the state is that of a fluid collaboration, whereby an ambiguous partnership is sustained through continuous acts of guarded improvisation. Journalists and the state actively reinvent the rules of their engagement, but the latter holds the upper hand in controlling the space and scope of this creative manoeuvring. This improvised cooperative mode of state-society relations differs from other authoritarian contexts, pointing to China's uniqueness when it comes to managing critical voices in the long-term. This book provides fresh empirical and theoretical insights into Chinese politics, comparative authoritarianism and global communication.

**Maria Repnikova** is a scholar of comparative authoritarianism and political communication in illiberal contexts, with a focus on China and Russia. She holds a Doctorate in Politics from Oxford University where she was a Rhodes Scholar. In the past, Maria has researched Chinese migration to Russia as a Fulbright Fellow, has held the Overseas Press Club fellowship in Beijing and was a post-doctoral fellow at the Annenberg School for Communication. Maria speaks fluent Mandarin and Russian. She teaches international communication, Chinese media politics and society, and information politics in non-democratic regimes.

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Maria Repnikova

*Georgia State University*



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**To Change-Makers Within the System**





## Preface

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This book examines the relationship between China's critical journalists and the party-state in the past decade, under the Hu-Wen leadership. In contrast to existing scholarship on comparative authoritarianism and Chinese politics and society, which tends to analyse the perspectives of societal actors and the state separately from one another, this study brings the two together, unveiling the intricacies of their interactions. It portrays the engagement between critical journalists and central officials as a fluid, state-dominated partnership characterised by continuous improvisation. Party officials grant journalists an ambiguous consultative role, while journalists align their political and professional agenda to the central state. Their collaboration is maintained in large part due to the flexible nature of this arrangement, referred to as 'guarded improvisation'. The two actors make ad hoc adjustments in response to one another, but the party-state consistently directs the process and the scope of this creative manoeuvring.

The analysis draws on unique access to politically sensitive material, including 120 in-depth interviews with critical journalists, media and crisis management experts, and government officials. It also includes multilayered textual analysis of the Chinese Communist Party journal, *Qiushi*, and selected articles in two outspoken media outlets, *Caijing* and *Nanfang Zhoumo*. The data is employed to analyse the routine interactions between critical journalists and the party-state, as well as their dynamics during major crisis events, specifically the Wenchuan earthquake and coal-mining disasters. This study further includes a comparative dimension by drawing contrasts between the case of China and the Soviet Union, as well as between China and Russia, and between the Hu-Wen period and the Xi era.

Through the lens of journalist-state relations, this book theorises the workings of limited openings for political public participation in China and under authoritarianism more broadly. In China, it captures the bottom-up and top-down dimensions of these openings by underscoring the within-the-system nature of China's societal activism, as well as its

unequal positioning vis-à-vis the state, and the importance of mutually embraced ambiguity for sustaining the engagement between critical voices and central officials. The book further demonstrates how the top-down management of political openings in China carries both consultative and fluid dimensions as the state opens up some input channels in policy-making while keeping the rules of the game intentionally ambiguous. Finally, the book questions the dichotomy of resilience versus democratisation underlying the study of comparative authoritarianism by highlighting the potential for societal actors to shape authoritarian governance in a constructive manner, even if not managing or intending to pave the way for a democratic transition.

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